

Welcome to Japan,

7

Makishima
Suzuki
ill. Yappen



MS. Elf!



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Prologue

Somewhere in this world, there was a place called the Land of Demons... This place was a wetland full of flying insects and thick growths of plants that occasionally devoured humans.

Any who stepped foot inside would be surprised by the number of monsters inhabiting the place. And should they discover the ominous sight of the labyrinth's deep underground, they would immediately turn on their heel, assuming they had enough time to do so.

It was a wild place with no country emblem, where those of monstrous lineage constantly waged wars of aggression to assert their dominance, but they had been eerily quiet as of late.

The leaders of the surrounding lands had even been gathering to discuss why they had been so peaceful in recent days. But every time the topic came up, they came to the conclusion that the Land of Magic had cowered in response to their reinforced military might.

It was true that humans were greatly inferior in one-on-one combat. However, they were a force to be reckoned with when it came to group combat, such as during war. They were capable of employing a variety of offensive methods, and the use of tactics and strategy made them even greater threats. And since they had formed a multinational alliance, the savage monsters wouldn't have dared to declare battle against them. The reason the humans didn't invade the Land of Demons was simply due to the fact that it didn't offer any attractive resources as an incentive.

However, if anyone who had experienced war with the Land of Demons had been at these discussions, they surely would have questioned whether any of this was true. After all, they would have seen firsthand just how relentless the demons could be. But unfortunately, those witnesses never lived to tell the tale, so they obviously couldn't give their input at these meetings.

What was the true reason the Land of Demons chose to simply wait and see?

Few could answer that question, but the man who stood up now in the dimly lit room with a faint smile on his face appeared to have all the answers.

He had a tall, slender build, his hair dancing about as purple flashes of electricity occasionally crackled around him. All the color seemed to have been lost from his hair, and one could see as his hair wavered that his smile didn't reach his eyes.

The crackling noise could be heard from the center of the room. It seemed to be caused by numerous dark magic users, each of whom emitted purple lightning from their outstretched fingers. They gathered electricity into a metallic cylinder, and a masculine voice ordered, "Continue."

As for the others lined up around them, their gazes darted all around, trying to figure out what was going on. They each seemed to be stalwart fighters. Among them was the only woman in the place, named Kartina.

This was a bizarre sight from her point of view as well. She was surrounded by metallic relics, and something like a glass water tank could be seen beyond the magic casters. She couldn't see what was inside due to the darkness, but she caught a glimpse of shadows between the flashes of purple lightning. Was that a human figure she saw, or were her eyes playing tricks on her?

"Hey, Kartina. Have you heard anything about this?" She turned to find that it was a nervous, sweaty man who had asked the question. His body was covered in grime from the continuous battles he had been fighting, and Kartina figured she was in a similar state herself.

She thought about it for a moment, then answered.

"No, they haven't told me a thing. My grandfather told me morions grow all over this place, but that's about it. Wait a second... Now that I think about it, the captain did mention that this place was the land of salvation."

The man shot her a look of disbelief. It was as if he meant to say, "I'm not gonna get myself killed believing in some old folktale." Kartina had to agree with that notion. Still, she didn't wear that same look of despair on her face, as she had her current mission to focus on. Not to mention, considering the fact that their captain had been giving such accurate orders, as though he saw through everything that was going on, it was unlikely that he would be tricked

by baseless tales of old or screw up his plans now.

Getting through the Arilai army and reaching the third layer of the ancient labyrinth would be no simple task. They had begun to learn how to use Magic Stones, and many of their comrades had already fallen victim to their newfound power. Kartina wished to gain brighter prospects for their sake, but it didn't seem like the tides would change as of yet.

"Looks like they've fallen into a deep sleep after a thousand years." Kartina looked back to the source of the exasperated voice to find the captain still staring at the casters without moving an inch. "Keep at it," he said, then turned on his heel. Wishing to at least understand what was going on, Kartina stepped forward.

"Captain, I would like to know what the situation is." His eyes, which were the color of melted honey, turned to her in response, and he let out an affirmative grunt. It was as if he was just noticing she was there, but there was no hint of frustration or panic in his demeanor.

The captain brushed some dust off of a chair, then took a seat. He glanced at the other members of the party.

"Get some rest, everyone. Once that thing wakes up, we will massacre our hated enemy, the Arilai army. We will be quite busy in no time."

His statement only left the others wondering, "How?" They had no idea what that thing was, but understood the immense power of the Arilai army.

Seeing their reaction, the captain opened his mouth, but refrained from speaking, opting to give another grunt instead. Judging from the look on his face, he seemed to have given up on helping the others understand the situation.

"Oh well. You'll understand soon enough. All I can say is, you have much to look forward to. Dismissed," the man said from his chair, a dauntless smile on his face.

Chapter of Midsummer, Episode 7: Shirley's Debut

Everyone dreams when they fall asleep. When they awaken in their bed, they're left with vague memories of their dream, and they may mutter to themselves about how strange it was. One can only search for their dreams in their past memories. But if one were really able to see their dreams with their own eyes, maybe they could view a sight like this.

It was dark all around me. The view was blurry, and the sound was muddled. When I reached out to touch the things drifting around me, my fingers simply passed through them as I felt a slippery sensation. As I considered what a strange place it was, I noticed a woman walking before me with her black hair swaying and seemingly melding into the shadows. She turned around to face me.

She was the legendary being known as the Arkdragon, Wridra. She was quite a strange individual; I had heard she was thousands of years old, and although I could sense her grand majesty at times, there were also times when I couldn't feel it at all.

Silently, she parted her crimson-painted lips as she spoke to me, but I couldn't understand what she was saying. It was as if her voice was being diffused before it could reach me.

Realizing I couldn't hear her, Wridra smiled faintly, then pointed. I followed her finger with my eyes, and then noticed I was holding a hand that was much paler than my own.

It belonged to the half-fairy elf, Mariabelle. She was quite a strange one too. I looked to my side to find her ear, shaped like a spear tip, and her amethyst eyes met my own. There was a wise light shining in those eyes, their beauty gleaming brightly even in the darkness. Perhaps it was because half of her very being was connected to the fairy realm. Mariabelle tugged on my sleeve, then moved her vivid lips closer to my ear.

"I hear this place is called the shadow realm. The pools of darkness that

Wridra controls are connected to strange worlds.” Her whispers sounded like we were underwater, making them hard to decipher. I couldn’t help but reply with a question upon hearing an unfamiliar term.

“Shadow realm?”

“Yes, that’s what they call it. Your world was born with the words ‘Let there be light’ according to mythology, right? But maybe the shadow realm existed before that. Hey, do you remember when we fought a being from this world?”

I stared blankly for a moment in response to Marie’s question. When had we ever connected with and fought anything in this world? I scanned the darkness around us and thought about it, and the sensation around me somehow felt familiar.

Then, I remembered the residents of the shadow realm that had suddenly appeared when I fought Shirley the floor master. They had stared at me with their big, golden eyeballs, swinging their sharp claws in both hands down toward me. When I looked around again, it felt as if those creatures were lurking within the shadows.

“Wridra called this ‘the world on the other side.’ She also said it was a place of emptiness. But there’s nothing to be afraid of. We just need to keep moving forward, like children walking down the street at night. Let’s go.”

With that, she pulled me by my hand. Wridra and Shirley awaited us ahead, and although I could only see their blurry figures, I could tell they were chatting about something. To the floor master and the Arkdragon, this was nothing but a familiar sight.

The words “world on the other side” that Mariabelle had mentioned caught my attention. I had the ability to travel between shrines by borrowing power from the god of travel. The view that I saw while in transit felt like a “world on the other side” too, and I wondered if this place had anything to do with it.

“Come on. Don’t make me leave you alone in this darkness.” Mariabelle urged me forward. I apologized and quickened my pace. Whatever this place was, it was far beyond my understanding. As soon as we left this land, it would surely return to a state without sound or light and only the faintest of warmth.

When we caught up to the others, Wridra turned with her hands on her hips, seeming displeased about our tardiness. She then turned away again, her big tail facing us as she continued her trek.

“...get there, you should be able to hear my voice.”

It seemed we were nearing our destination. Wridra flicked her hand, and the shadows that had been pooled around her grew thinner. After a slight delay, her bored-sounding voice finally reached my ears.

I was taken aback. The bright sunlight came down upon me abruptly. I narrowed my eyes at the light, putting a hand before me to make shade as I adjusted to the brightness. The streets that were semi-buried in sand gradually came into view, and beyond them were rows of sand-colored buildings.

It seemed we had arrived in the country of Arilai. It would normally have taken days to get here from the second floor, but it only took a few hours with the help of the Arkdragon. Her powers were quite convenient.

The center of Arilai had been developed around a gently sloping mountain. I noticed our companion staring at the scenery with great interest, and we slowed our pace.

The woman had bright, honey-colored hair and was adorned in an outfit that seemed easier to maneuver in than her usual dresses. But I felt like her outfit didn't really affect her ease of walking through the sands, considering her spectral form. Maybe she just felt like dressing that way.

“Hey there, Shirley. This is the desert country of Arilai. Come to think of it, I've never taken a leisurely look at it like this before.” Last time, we had invited her to the Manor of Black Roses to scare the hero candidate, Zarish, together. I imagined how awful it must have been to receive such an invitation, but then Shirley turned to me, her smile widening.

Shirley was not human, and she lived on the second floor of the ancient labyrinth. It felt strange seeing her enveloped in the bright sunlight with the cityscape of Arilai behind her, not to mention the hazy shadow that could be seen at her feet.

Perhaps it was due to all the sand in the air, but the blue sky had a whitish tint

to it, and the wind was completely dry now that the rainy season was over. Shirley ran a finger through her stray hair and tucked it behind her ear.

It was hard to believe her true form was actually that of a ghost, since her body wasn't in its usual semitransparent state thanks to the Arkdragon's help. This only affected her outward appearance, but most people couldn't tell. And they obviously wouldn't have known that she was a floor master.

Just then, I remembered something. I rummaged through my bag and found what I was looking for.

"Shirley, let me show you something." Shirley moved closer with a curious expression, and I showed her a piece of parchment.

I smiled as her sky blue eyes went wide, then carefully untied the binding and spread out the parchment to reveal the words "Up to four foreign members may participate in the raid." It was the permit for entering the ancient labyrinth, and we would reach the maximum party limit of four members with Shirley's inclusion.

"Look, you joining our party was officially approved by Arilai. I heard the raid on the ancient labyrinth is reopening again, so we should go pay our respects to everyone we'll be working with."

In response, Shirley placed her hands on her own chest, then made a groaning gesture for some reason. She then started fussing with her hair... *Wait, was she getting nervous? A floor master that's afraid to talk to people?*

"Oh, are you not good at meeting new people? But you didn't panic when you first met me and Marie," I noted with confusion, but Shirley groaned again and took two steps away from us. She explained by gesturing with her hands and fingers, but...according to her, she wasn't afraid of us because we were cute and small. It was hard to believe she was a terrifying floor master.

"There's no need to worry so much. Just a simple bow would do," I advised, but it seemed Shirley was beside herself, restlessly twirling her hair with her finger and staring up at the sky. As I was trying to figure out what the issue was, Marie tugged on my sleeve from beside me.

"Wasn't Shirley wearing some sort of semitransparent veil over her face when

we first met her?”

“Hm, now that you mention it... Maybe she was wearing it because she’s shy.” Shirley blinked. She then pulled out an embroidered piece of cloth, and I watched as she wrapped it around her eyes.

Wait, why did she put that on? That embroidery does look nice on her, but does she not want to look people in the eyes that badly? Marie and I had many questions, but meanwhile, Shirley made a cute victorious pose as if everything was fine now.

I thought that she would only stand out more, but I swallowed my words and figured it wasn’t too strange for a ghost to cover her eyes and let it go. Shirley’s melancholy seemed to have been resolved. I didn’t want to ruin it for her or bring her mood back down.

We walked around within Arilai’s castle walls for some time, then arrived at a well-maintained area. Various water storage facilities could be seen all over the place, with water flowing downward via waterways. The colorful fabrics, spices, and tea leaves lined up at the storefronts seemed to have an air of refinement to them.

This area was where the upper class lived, and they had the privilege of hearing the pleasant sound of running water while walking around the premises. But one had to get recognized by the government as a person of importance in order to earn that privilege, and it came with the duty of participating in raids on ancient labyrinths, so I didn’t particularly want to live here.

As I was explaining this, Marie suddenly jumped into the conversation.

“Oh, but that’s how it is in any country. Nice places to live have high value, and we’ve raided the ancient labyrinths too. We even defeated floor masters twice.” Well, Shirley forfeited the fight on the second floor... I nearly pointed this out, but then a thought came to me.

Maybe Marie wanted to live in a nice mansion or something. I was reminded of the time Zera and Puseri had let us use theirs. It seemed to me like Marie was starting to get accustomed to luxury.

“But we didn’t accept an S-Rank mission, so I don’t think we’ll get much credit.”

“Maybe we should have accepted it,” she muttered with furrowed brows, and I felt a bead of sweat roll down my face. We wanted to explore the ancient labyrinth, but we didn’t want to take on serious work, so we had just turned down the mission from the royal family the other day. I had a full-time job anyway, so it would have been difficult for me to participate in any official capacity.

The reason we were heading toward the facility where the raid parties gathered was just to greet them as I had mentioned earlier. One never knew when something unexpected would happen in the labyrinth, so I thought it would be a good idea to be on good terms with them.

And so, we made our way through the high-class district and past the gated area, and we saw a large building in the distance. We arrived at a place for social gatherings among aristocrats known as Royal Arilai.

A servant opened the doors for us to enter, and the classy interior with a high ceiling awaited us. It was constructed with an abundance of expensive glass, but the place was only moderately bright thanks to the curtains filtering out the sun. Marie’s eyes lit up at the sight.

“Oh, oh, so this is what life is like for rich people! We’re finally able to visit amazing places like this now, huh?”

To be honest, I couldn’t understand what was so amazing about it. I mean, I could of course tell that everything was obviously expensive. But I felt like I would get yelled at if I touched anything, so the place made me feel uneasy, if anything. I expressed this to Marie, and she just made a smug face, then pointed at the things around us and started to explain.

“You may not understand this world, since all you did was travel all the time. Take a look at that over there. See those swords lined up in that corner? That area is for training and testing your skills. That area is for practicing dance, and that looks like the library. I’m sure there are very valuable books there too. Nnh, I’d love to go over there right now and see what they have!” Marie spoke much faster than usual, and her eyes were alight with excitement. It seemed like she

was just expressing her overwhelming interest rather than giving me an explanation, and all I could do was respond with a hesitant “R-Right.” She really must have wanted to come here.

I felt like I now had a pretty good idea of what this place was like. This was a place of respite for those in high social standing, and it also served as an entertainment facility. Seeing all the well-dressed people having pleasant chats together, I was again reminded of how out of place I felt.

Just then, I felt someone tap me on the shoulder.

“You guys always seem to have fun wherever you go.” I turned around to find a tall man smiling at me. The well-built, black-haired man was the leader of Team Bloodstone, Zera. He was generally a friendly person, and he had fought heroically with the instincts of a wild animal when we had teamed up at the ancient labyrinth.

“Oh, hello, Zera. I’m sorry if we were being noisy.”

“I thought I recognized your familiar faces, but I see you have a new team member. Oh, no need to be scared. I may look like this, but I’m actually a gentleman, really,” Zera explained hastily when he saw that Shirley had immediately moved to hide behind me. A woman with fiery red hair shot him an exasperated look from behind him.

“You? A gentleman? Please.”

“Doula, please don’t look at me like I’m completely hopeless. Besides, weren’t you complaining about how these high-class places make you uneasy?”

“Yes, I hate them. But I’ve been taught how to deal with it, and my mother has brought me here many times before. I’d never want to go through that again.” It seemed she had been reminded of some sort of traumatic past. The displeased-looking woman was Doula, the leader of Team Andalusite. We had been on friendly terms with her ever since we rescued her on a mission. Marie had also gotten close to the two of them even though she had once been known for her hatred for humans.

“Since you two are here, does that mean you accepted the S-Rank mission?” Marie asked with a pleasant smile.

“Yup, we’re in the same boat as you. Let’s do our best and...”

“Oh, but we didn’t accept it,” Marie said, and Zera’s hand froze in midair as he was reaching out for a handshake. His face twitched as his smile also froze, and he glanced back and forth between Marie and Doula, as if he was wondering, “Then why are you here?” He must have figured I was the easiest one to talk to, because he put his arms around my shoulders.

“Hmm? Kazuhiho? Why haven’t you guys taken the mission after basically inviting us to do it in the first place? Hm?”

“Well, I discussed it with Marie, and...” It wasn’t as if I could tell him I had work. I made an awkward attempt at an explanation, but he wasn’t buying it at all. I looked around helplessly, but Marie had walked off toward the back of the room, and I felt a bit shocked about being left behind. Marie turned around, perhaps to help me out of this awkward situation.

“Everyone is gathering already. You wouldn’t want to get scolded for being late, would you?”

“Oh, good point. All right, Kazuhiho, I wanna talk to you more about this later.” With that, I was released.

The raid on the third floor of the ancient labyrinth was about to begin, so there was no time for fooling around. I quickly followed the others.

A guide led us into a room where a crowd of people was already gathered. There were a total of forty-three members there, including Team Diamond, Team Bloodstone, Team Andalusite, and our Team Amethyst.

A familiar dark elf waved her hand as we made our way to our seats, and I gestured a small wave to her, signaling “Let’s talk later.” Eve seemed to be doing well as usual.

I drew a chair from a circular table, and Marie whispered her thanks as she sat down. I took a seat next to her, and someone else came by to pass out tea. I scanned the room while taking a sip.

The men in the room had strange looks in their eyes for being at a meeting that was supposedly meant to unite us. They weren’t menacing or anything, but there was an air of restlessness as they glanced around. I wondered why, then

followed their gazes and found the answer.

Team Diamond, also known as the flowers of the battlefield, along with most of our team, consisted of women. This meant about a third of the members here were women, and beautiful ones at that. Those who weren't used to their presence couldn't help but get distracted. That must have been why some of them were fixing their hair or putting on their best manly face. I understood how they felt, but it was also somewhat sad to see.

The buzz in the room was quickly quieted by the sound of two loud claps. I looked up at the platform, and there stood Hakam, the leader of the raid into the ancient labyrinth. The well-dressed, sun-bronzed man had an air of authority as a military leader.

"I thank you all for gathering here today. I'd like to begin the raid on the third floor with all of you, but there's something I must say first. Out of the eight who had lost consciousness during the raid on the second floor, five of them have reawakened."

Many had fallen during the raid on the second floor. They had awakened as Reapers after having their souls sucked out of them, and Marie and I had defeated three of them. We couldn't think of any way to save them in the moment, but I sometimes found myself wondering if we really had no other choice.

It was a relief to know the others had regained their souls. This was, of course, thanks to Shirley's help. I looked at her side profile with the veil over her eyes, but there was no change in her expression. She didn't have much of an emotion when it came to death despite her lovely appearance, which was probably part of her nature as a god of death.

Some responded to the news with some reserved claps. They seemed to be in celebration for those who made it back, and a prayer for those who hadn't.

Hakam looked around the crowd once it quieted down, and his sharp gaze settled on me for some reason. I wondered if I'd done anything to earn his glare.

"I will now talk about the third floor, but just so you're all aware: that boy there didn't join for the mission. He joined just for fun. Now, some of you may

be confused by this. I am too. His team just happened to be here during this time, so if they happen to let slip some confidential information, you don't need to come reporting it to me. I'd rather not know about it." There was a burst of laughter, and I got some teasing comments like "Can't help it if you're here for fun!" Marie and I turned red.

I mean, our actions really must have been inexplicable from an outsider's perspective. Nobody *wanted* to raid the third floor, but we were doing it for kicks. I had to thank Hakam and Aja for accepting our request anyway. I looked over at Aja the wizard, and I saw that he was laughing joyously by the window. I heard that he had taken a few disciples since the last time I saw him, and they were spending their days analyzing and researching the uses of Magic Stones.

Hakam cleared his throat again, directing everyone's attention back to himself.

"We've reduced the number of soldiers by seventy percent compared to the last raid. I'm sure this raised some concern for some of you. If you wish to withdraw out of fear for your life, now would be your only chance. But I've only gathered those whom I can trust here today. I believe this is my most important asset. Hear this, warriors of Arilai: all of you, the most distinguished fighters in this country, will band together as one. I can't wait to take on the challenge of this upcoming raid with your combined strength at my side. Go forth and unleash your power to your heart's content."

With that, Hakam looked upon the crowd with eyes burning with passion. Then, like firewood the moment embers are cast upon it, their spirits too were set aflame. They all believed that a reduction in the number of soldiers didn't necessarily mean their fighting prowess would also be reduced.

Conversely, I couldn't help but turn my eyes downward.

According to rumors, the scouting party that specialized in espionage had been wiped out. That team consisted of the royal family's most skilled, which spoke volumes on the difficulty of the third floor. The danger I sensed instinctively kept my mind calm.

As I debated whether we really should have been there, I noticed someone casually moving in closer to me. Wridra's almond-shaped eyes looked to me,

and she whispered softly into my ear.

“Kitase, what are your thoughts on this raid on the third floor?” I glanced to my side and could see her dark eyes narrow in an amused smile. The Arkdragon’s expression told me she may have known a lot more than she was letting on, but I also knew she probably wasn’t going to just give me the answers. The question was, how could I extract information out of her?

I considered my reply for some time, then opened my mouth to speak.

“The purpose isn’t to get Magic Stones or treasure, but there’s something on the third floor that could be a threat to Arilai. And they’re running out of time. I think the so-called rebels have something to do with it,” I said to gauge her reaction. Wridra made an impressed noise, then moved away from me without saying anything. That told me my guess was correct, even though she hadn’t said so outright.

That explained why the royal family had issued an S-Rank mission directly. I felt like the pieces were finally fitting together, and I felt immense gratitude toward Wridra for confirming my suspicion.

It wasn’t as if I had thrown out a completely wild guess.

The members of the raid party had been reduced to thirty percent. We hadn’t gained much from clearing the second floor, yet the raid was ongoing. In fact, things were now moving at an accelerated pace. Not to mention, the royal family’s elite warriors had been sent on a mere scouting mission.

Considering all this, my conclusion was pretty much the only plausible one. Though, that was no reason to be relieved by any means.

But I was still left with one question: if Arilai was faced with such a threat, why didn’t they go all out and gather their forces to face the issue? It seemed to me like there was some horrible threat outside of the rebels and ancient labyrinth that they were preparing for.

I broke out into a cold sweat at the thought, but then I heard something unexpected.

“Everyone, I’d like to introduce a powerful ally... The finest of Arilai’s warriors.”

A powerful ally? We already had Team Diamond here, and I couldn't think of anyone more skilled than them. As I was taken by surprise, I saw someone making their way onto the platform.

The crowd began buzzing when they realized it was a man who had an estimated level of 120. There were streaks of white in his hair and animalistic features on his face that didn't seem to fit his age. He smirked.

"Hey, you brats. I doubt anyone here hasn't heard of me, but I'm Gaston, the only participant out of Team Ruby. No matter what you do, don't ask about my age or whether or not I have a girlfriend." In the silence, I thought I could almost hear someone say, "You *don't* have a girlfriend?"

He seemed like one of those aggressive, bossy types. I thought he was a fierce-looking old man when I had seen him at the oasis from afar, and hearing him speak didn't change that impression one bit.

The old man Gaston then said something strange.

"According to prophecy, that ancient labyrinth will be where I die. That's why I'm leaving my beloved team members behind. Boy, I can't wait. I finally get to meet the reaper in person!" He opened his mouth wide and laughed. I could hear the others gulp from his sheer intensity. There was something strangely powerful about his very presence. Shirley pointed at herself, as if to ask, "Is he talking about me?" I shook my head.

After we went over the strategies and team formations, Hakam took the group out of the meeting hall. The raid would soon begin, and we would step foot inside the ancient labyrinth the day after we departed.

As an aside, we were technically considered outsiders for this mission, so we were allowed to meet up with them at the site. I wanted to keep Wridra's long-distance travel skill a secret, so that was convenient for us.

And so, the raid party of forty-four members had been formed.

§

This library sure is bright... Such were my thoughts as we looked around the facility full of expensive-looking glass. Libraries usually blocked out the sun to prevent the pages from getting damaged, but it seemed this place was built

differently.

There were many large windows all over the place, and the curtains gently waving in the sun had intricate embroidery on them. It went without saying that this was the perfect place for an elegant afternoon reading a book. Any booklover would have surely been thrilled to spend their time here.

“Wow, it’s so pretty. Let’s go see what kind of books we can find here at Royal Arilai.”

With that, Marie went deeper into the room without hesitation. I turned around and saw Wridra and Shirley ordering some tea from a servant, waving their hands as if telling us to enjoy ourselves. I wondered if a ghost could even drink tea as I went to follow Marie.

The receptionist checked my proof of membership as soon as I entered the room, then quietly welcomed me inside. Aja had thankfully given us these cards earlier, allowing us to use these restricted facilities. I recalled how the old man looked at us like we were his grandchildren. When I caught up to Marie, she was checking the spines of some books one by one.

“Look, they’re all very old, but they’re well taken care of. It’s unfortunate that they’re not very practical.” I looked at the books she was gesturing to and saw that most of them covered topics regarding developing the country, like swordsmanship, construction, tactics, history, and commerce. It seemed there wasn’t much here that would have been useful for a Spirit Sorceress like Marie. She probably would have been brimming with excitement if they had some picture books like my local library did.

Marie turned her pale purple eyes toward the windows. Seeing a woman sipping some tea as she read a book there, Marie’s eyes lit up.

“Drinking some tea while reading seems like a wonderful practice. We should learn from her.” I smiled as she began busily picking out some books, then decided to help her with her selection. The books she handed me were about farming and architecture. I was reminded about the pumpkin seeds we had planted, and I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“There you are. I’ve been looking all over for you guys. What are you picking out books for?” I turned around and saw a dark-skinned woman standing there.

The long-eared woman was obviously a dark elf, as well as a member of Team Diamond.

“Oh, Eve. I didn’t know you were interested in libraries too.”

“I’m not. You really think I have any interest in a place like this? Ugh, Marie, why are you reading books about architecture? You’re kinda weirding me out, to be honest.”

“Don’t say that when you’ve never read one yourself. As an elf, you’re going to live a long life. Why don’t you study and learn a thing or two? It’s important to have hobbies, you know.”

R-Right... Marie was a bit *too* into her hobbies and was knee-deep in otaku culture, but I decided to keep my mouth shut. I didn’t want her glaring at me.

Marie stood with a mountain of books at her back, and Eve was currently shrinking away from one of her glares. The dark elf’s face then turned smug for some reason, and she pointed at herself with a thumb.

“My mind and body automatically reject it, so no can do.” In other words, she just didn’t want to study. Though, that was no surprise. I thought she was kind of similar to Zera in that sense, but I kept my mouth shut.

Marie let out an exasperated sigh, then turned her purple eyes toward Eve.

“You said you’ve been looking for us. Why?”

“Well, we’re about to head to the oasis, right? I don’t feel like walking all the way there, so I was hoping you could give my team a quick ride there.”

“Wait, who told you about that?” I asked without thinking, and Marie quickly put her hand over my mouth. It was too late. Eve had just thrown out a guess, but a smile spread across her face as her suspicion had been confirmed. She beckoned us over with a finger, and we followed her to a nearby window. It seemed she was about to dig our secrets out of us.

I felt Marie pinch my butt from behind to reprimand me for my slip of the tongue. But it only tickled, if anything, and when I mouthed an apology, she just wrinkled her brows with a cute expression.

Eve rested her chin in her hand at the circular table, then moved her face

closer, as if to demand answers. What I couldn't understand was, how had she guessed our secret on instincts alone? She should have needed some hints to reach that conclusion at all.

"Eve, how did you know we had a way to travel around?"

"Well, everyone was busy getting ready, but Team Amethyst was the only one that was just chilling, so I thought that was suspicious. I'd understand if it was just Wridra, but you two seem more careful about that kind of stuff. So I thought, why not ask?"

That made sense to me. I nodded. I'd never considered that the fact that we were picking out books had tipped her off. Come to think of it, she had the unique ninja class, so maybe she was especially skilled when it came to gathering intel. Or maybe it was just a woman's intuition.

I glanced at Marie, and she shrugged her shoulders as if to say, "Do as you wish." I debated whether this was something we should have revealed at all, but Eve did look out for us to protect our secret at the Manor of Black Roses. She already knew about our ability to travel between this world and Japan, so I figured it wouldn't have been a big issue to tell her about our means of travel.

"Can you keep a secret, Eve?"

"Of course! I'd never break a promise with a friend," she replied confidently, and I decided to trust her. I had Marie block off sound from leaking outside of our circle, then raised three fingers at Eve. Her blue eyes stared with great interest.

"We have three methods of travel. There's my long-distance travel skill: Trayn, the Journey's Guide, which I've told you about before. We can also fly through the sky with the Magic Stone, and finally, we have Wridra's magic."

"Wait, what? What do you mean you can fly with a Magic Stone? Can I ride it too?" She excitedly moved her face closer, but I urged her to let me finish.

I could only bring Marie with me with my long-distance travel skill, and it was limited to locations with a shrine dedicated to the god of travel. Plus, it was limited to one use per day. The Magic Stone required either Marie or myself to ride it, and we could only bring one more passenger at most. This meant neither

method was suited for bringing Team Diamond along with us.

Wridra's magic could have solved this issue, but we wanted to keep this method a secret as much as possible. It was far too convenient of a skill, and we definitely wanted to avoid any undesirable attention.

"Well, that's not gonna work. You guys are the center of attention already. You cleared the second floor, and every aristocrat is fighting each other to bring you under their control," Eve said.

"Yes, that's why we've been staying at Puseri's and Zera's places. As you said, it would be trouble if people found out about our travel methods with everything else going on," Marie added. We all groaned at once. If Team Diamond also arrived at the oasis in an instant, many people would start asking questions. A group transport skill was just that valuable. It could turn the tide of a battle if used to send soldiers across a battlefield, and it would be sought after as a means of escape in the ancient labyrinth.

"Hmm, all right. I'll give up on it then. My team would get upset if I'm the only one who goes there with no effort and I leave them all behind. But about that beach trip you two mentioned before...? Can't you use that magic to take me with you?"

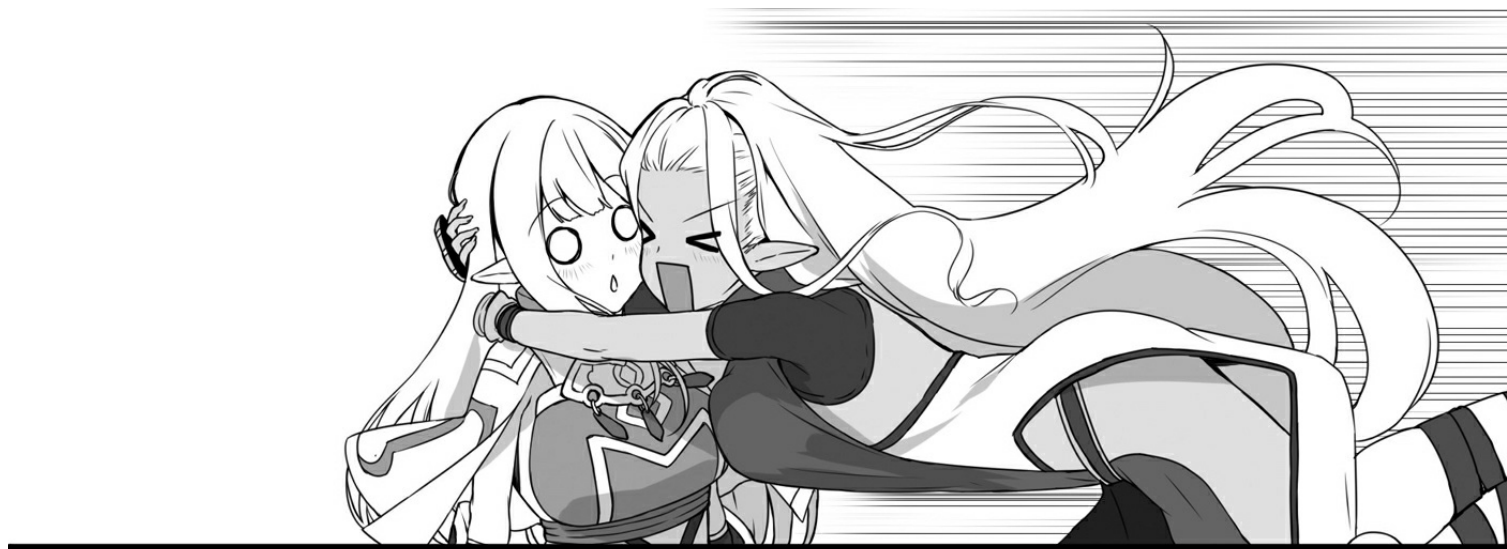
She had a point. We had turned down her request once before, but it would have been possible with this method. Even Wridra may not have been able to fly in unfamiliar lands, but we could arrive on the site with my skill, then go pick her up from there. We had the third floor of the ancient labyrinth and the rebels to deal with first, but we could probably take Eve with us afterward.

Marie also nodded with a look that said she was begrudgingly impressed.

"You really are good at being wily when it suits you, aren't you? Fine, we may as well have a fun goal to look forward to while we're on this mission."

"Yay! Thanks, Marie. I'm so glad you're my first elf friend. Love ya!" Eve wrapped her arms in a hug around Marie, who blinked with a surprised look on her face. I couldn't help but feel happy seeing them get along like this, even though Marie was screaming as Eve happily pressed her lips against her cheek in a kiss.

After some time, we said goodbye to Eve for now. It was right around that time that the proud elites of Arilai departed for their mission.



The area around the gates was particularly lively with the priests' instruments sounding loudly. They were a blessing to send off those who were departing for the ancient labyrinth.

Not only were there priests who worshipped the land god, but countless flowers were scattered from the second floor of the surrounding buildings as a blessing for Puseri of the Blackrose Clan. The royal families of old were still beloved to this day, and the leader of the reformed Team Diamond smiled at the citizens showing their support. Though, internally, she may or may not have been upset at a certain dark elf for wasting time doing who-knows-what.

The crowd pushing forward only added to the clamor, and they directed their passionate gazes to the departing warriors as if they were the next generation of heroes. The raid party was a great boon for the country of Arilai's economy. The people wished for their triumphant return and didn't hold back their words of support. However, among them was someone who stared with a different intent than the rest of the people.

The one who stood at the balcony of the royal castle and cast a cold glare below was an important member of the royal family. There was a shade of resignation and contempt in the young man's eyes, and those around him stared at the raid party with similar expressions.

The man who stood at their lead opened his mouth to speak.

"Hmph... Do you know how many of that raid party will return alive?"

"Lord Wallace, I do not..."

"They will all die within a few days. My father was fooled by Hakam's empty promises, but it pains me to think they will all end up as corpses soon."

Outside, the people were still giving their words of blessing. The flower petals added beautiful colors to the scene as they were scattered to the sky, and despite the cheerful smiles of the departing soldiers, the royal looked at them as if they were already dead.

The small raid party had been the topic of conversation throughout the

country. Everyone wanted to know why its size had been reduced to a mere third of the previous one. The popular theory was that they were planning on sending the elites to lead the way, then sending reinforcements later on like last time. Sending too big of a unit at once would mean most of the soldiers wouldn't have had much to do at first. So it was more efficient to send more units in later on as needed. Such was the main rumor that had been going around as of late.

However, some people knew the truth. This small roster had to conquer the third floor and on by themselves. They knew they would not come back alive.

"In fact, I feel sorry for them. They're seen as expendable," the royal said before turning his back. The rest of the royal family was gathered just beyond, and he greeted them before focusing his attention on the large map on the table.

Numerous seemingly handmade pieces could be seen on the map, and those gathered gave their opinions to one another.

With the raid on the ancient labyrinth underway, another battle was about to begin here.

§

I looked up to the sound of chirping and shaded my eyes from the sun as a bird flew overhead.

We had taken our time making preparations. I felt bad about having it so easy, but we just needed to wait for the others at the hall on the second floor. I had heard they would arrive late at night, so we would probably have been asleep by then. The actual raid wouldn't start until tomorrow morning, so it wouldn't have been an issue if we were to regroup late.

Supposedly, our base of operations was to be in front of the door leading to the third floor. It was somewhat far from the second floor, and they would be using a route that went around the hall, so they shouldn't have been too noisy. But honestly, I was the noisiest one in the forest as I pounded some stakes with a metallic *clang*. The clanging continued, and some birds flew in from a distance to see what was going on.

There was still time, but not enough to waste. I wanted to use this opportunity to check on the tools we had purchased in town and put up the instant tent. Since Wridra was carrying us here, I had splurged on some items that would let us spend our time in leisure.

Marie had been reading a book in the shade, but it seemed she had found a good spot to stop, so she stood up and stretched. She brushed the leaves off of her bottom and looked at me.

“So, why did you end up buying such a big tent?”

“Well, we’ll be going on this mission with a bunch of people, but we don’t want others to see us sleeping. So I thought it would be better if we came back here to rest. Shirley can manage her forest as usual, and we’ll get to rest peacefully.” As long as we had our reliable companion, Wridra, we could return here whenever we wanted. If we secured a comfortable place to sleep, it would surely make our mission easier going forward. I explained this to Marie, who looked rather surprised and impressed.

“Now that you mention it, we wouldn’t have to carry the pot around either. Okay, then I’ll help too.”

“Oh, it’s okay, it’s not too much work. I already finished setting up the roof and support poles,” I said, but internally noted how difficult it was to put up a tent. I straightened out the poles, secured the foundation, then placed a large piece of fabric over it. I had become painfully aware of why people usually did this in groups.

After securing the exterior with some ropes and laying down some thick cloth on the ground, the process was pretty much done. With the milky-white tent having been erected, I pushed the curtain at the entrance open to check if it was fine to stay in.

“I think that should do it. Marie, you can come in now.” Maybe she thought it would come collapsing down on us. Marie entered the tent gingerly, looking around the circular room with caution. A satisfied expression then came over her after observing the spacious interior.

“Oh, this is nice. It’s more breezy than I thought. It’s actually quite comfortable in here.”

“I bought one that’s on the pricier side. It’s nice to have money for times like these.” I found it pointless to dwell on money in the dream world. Still, it was greatly advantageous to be able to buy things we needed whenever we wanted.

I showed Marie my palms, and she mirrored the gesture. Just as we slapped each other’s hands for a high five, the curtain opened and a familiar voice called to us.

“What are you two doing in there? There is something I wish to discuss. Cease your fooling around and come here.”

“Oh?” we said, looking silly with our hands pressed against one another.

§

Wridra guided us to an empty lot on the other side of the river. Curiously, there weren’t many weeds growing there, and it was well maintained like a sports ground. There was a lone tree there with a table and chair under it, which seemed somewhat out of place.

“Huh, I thought there were some woods over here.”

“I had Shirley move them out of the way. We will need to think of the layout now, after all. Hey, Shirley!”

Hm? Layout?

Wridra led us to a circular table, and I took a seat. The metal table with lattice-pattern holes seemed to be a fitting design for a Western garden. I realized I was getting distracted and decided to get our meals out of my bag. I didn’t have much time to cook lately, so I had brought some simple sandwiches today.

The ingredients, such as eggs, tomatoes, and bacon, were all sandwiched between slices of white bread and offered a vibrant and colorful spread beneath the shade of the trees. Once the tea had been passed around, it was time for a late lunch and a meeting to begin.

“*Om nom*, delicious... Mmf, this tuna sandwich is my favorite. The flavor that melts in your mouth is simply to die for. I cannot help but appreciate its sheer brilliance,” Wridra said.

“You always eat the same thing, Wridra. Tuna mayo was your favorite kind of rice ball too,” I replied.

“I cannot help that it is so delectable. In any case, we shall agree that all of the tuna sandwiches belong to me and begin our discussion.” She had claimed the rights to all of the tuna and mayo ever so naturally. Marie ignored Wridra’s claim and picked up one of the tuna sandwiches, taking a sip of her tea.

“What’s the layout you mentioned earlier? You aren’t planning on building a house here, are you?”

“Is that a problem? I have records of gardens and buildings with Japanese and Western elements from using my projection magic. You see? Behold.”

Wridra made images of Yamamoto-tei appear in the air, one after another. Marie and I watched with our mouths agape, while Shirley looked completely unsurprised. Come to think of it, this empty field was about the same size as that manor... A gust of wind blew by, and we finally returned to our senses.

“But we would need a lot of materials and manpower, wouldn’t we?”

“What are you saying? With Shirley and me here, there is virtually nothing we cannot make. After all, that is why we went to see the garden in person.”

Wridra looked at me as if to ask, “Am I wrong?” but this was all news to me.

Seeing Shirley nodding in agreement, it finally dawned on me that they were serious about building this house. I calmed myself as I took a sip of tea, then let out a breath. I scattered some bread crumbs for the birds that were gathering, then turned to Wridra. I could feel my heart beating in my chest.

“So we’re really building a house, then? And how much time do you think it would take, Wridra?”

“We will first need to decide upon the layout. For a relatively simple one-story house, it should take no more than a few days to construct its overall structure,” Wridra said as she leaned in closer as I had. Marie also leaned in as the reality of the situation began to set in, and I got to feel like we were having some sort of secret meeting.

Shirley missed her chance to join our little circle, so Marie and I took her by the hand and drew her in closer with us. And so, she was the only one with a big

smile on her face as our meeting officially began.

“I’ve actually dreamed of living in a one-story house for a long time. If we’re going to do this, I want it to be perfect. Is that okay with everyone?” I said.

“Oh wow, this is exciting. I prefer something that’s simple and warm over something flashy. It would be nice if there’s a place to read books too,” Marie replied. Wridra chuckled, then pointed her palms toward the table. A blueprint of a house was then projected into the air.

The real surprise was yet to come. Dark particles were expelled from her fingertips, taking shape into pillars and furniture on the layout and forming a miniature three-dimensional building. We all raised our voices in amazement at her abilities. It was like seeing a magical 3D printer at work.

“Hah, hah, this will be the layout for our reference. We will implement your ideas here. I assume there are no objections?”

“No, no, not at all. We’ll need a bath too. A clean one!” Marie said.

“I have no objections either, of course. Boy, I can’t wait. Creating things is your specialty, Wridra, but I didn’t think we’d get to see something on a scale like this.” Hearing our honest compliments, Wridra’s mouth curled into a confident smile.

It sure was nice having an Arkdragon friend. To think we would have our own house on the labyrinth’s second floor when we had been staying at other people’s places until now. I figured we could use that tent we had put up earlier while we waited for the house to be completed.

“Okay, if we’re doing this, let’s go all out. We won’t make it needlessly big, and we obviously don’t want it to be too small. Let’s make a house with a nice view that’s comfortable to live in.”

We all put our hands together, with Shirley gingerly putting her hand in last. Our collective “Yeah!” reverberated through the forest, and the birds that had been pecking at their bread crumbs turned around in surprise.

Now, deciding on the layout was a much more difficult process than we had expected.

We each shared our opinions based on the miniature that Wridra had made. We started placing things by order of importance, but it started to look worse as we added halls and individual rooms. Strange corridors and unnecessary spaces started getting tacked on to the design, and Wridra had to redo the layout each time. Marie stared hard at the miniature with furrowed brows, then muttered.

“Hmm, you can really tell how well designed those buildings are when you look at it like this.”

“My admiration for those architects grows the more we attempt to make our own. The Japanese are well versed in the art of using small spaces to their fullest. But that place was made to welcome a great number of guests, so it is not necessarily suitable for living in.” I didn’t expect us to struggle with architecture like this.

I couldn’t count how many times we started over from scratch. Before I knew it, Shirley was already nodding off to sleep. A small bird was resting atop her head, also falling asleep.

We could have gone to Japan to check out other model houses, but I couldn’t imagine any of them would have a design fit for this forest. In that sense, Yamamoto-tei really was the ideal building. We had hit a wall completely, and Wridra scratched at her head in frustration.

It would take some time for amateurs like us to finish the layout. But there had to be something we could do. If only there were a way for even amateurs to come up with a layout...

“Oh, I know. Why don’t we have Marie’s spirits actually build the layouts for us? We can’t help but look at the overall picture with the miniatures, and we’re no professional architects. It might be easier if we see the building in its full scale,” I suggested.

“Oh, that’s a good idea. We did learn about the concept of pillars before. We can make something like a house, but don’t expect it to be too sturdy. This will also help me level up my skill in the process.”

“Then I shall lend a hand as well. Marie’s spirit sorcery by itself may not be quite enough yet. I will provide support for the more intricate parts,” Wridra

said. Maybe she thought this little exercise would help her stay awake. They both stood from their seats, then started getting to work with stone spirits while looking back and forth between the miniature and the field.

During our time in the ancient labyrinth, we had quickly adapted the three-dimensional structure of the walls into our fighting strategy. Marie had been training her spirit sorcery since, so she was able to put up the layout of the house in no time. All I could do was applaud, and seeing the stone spirits change before my eyes made me feel like I had wandered into a picture book. I reached out to one of the stone walls to find that it was definitely solid to the touch. The walls were too thick, and the ceiling couldn't be held up due to its sheer weight. But it was definitely easier to take in compared to the blueprint we had been using.

"I'm impressed, Marie. I don't think there are many people in the continent that could build this with such accuracy."

"Ahem. I'll have you know that I'm actually quite talented," Marie replied. Well, I'd known just how talented she was since the day I met her.

Once the support pillars and walls were built, we all went inside through the entrance. I had fun watching the process of adding some windows to brighten up the place and changing the layout as we went.

"Let's keep the reception room next to the entrance as is. There's a lot of sun coming in here, so it should be a nice place to read some books."

"No objection. We may even make it more spacious by combining this room with the space in the back. Perhaps we should expand the lot. It is not as if we will need to pay for the land."

Some of the walls crumbled down, and the six tatami mat room was doubled to twelve. The lot size was increasing in the meantime, adding plenty of space to the right of the entrance for the reception room and another spacious area to the left of it. There were gardens to either side of the hall, and we could add shoji screen doors as dividers from which we could get a nice view.

"Yeah, this is nice. I've always dreamed of a view like this. It'll be even better with a big bathroom and a rest area at the end of the garden," I said.

“I know! I heard there’s an open-air bath at our travel destination in Izu. We could wait until after our trip to decide on the final layout.” Wridra nodded in agreement to Marie’s comment.

Maybe this house would be getting closer to completion through our visits to Japan and as we went sightseeing. We had been struggling with the sloppy blueprints earlier, but we were no longer sweating the small details. We had been rearranging the layout on the fly, so it obviously wasn’t going to be perfect. In fact, I felt as if those little imperfections were what gave it a unique flavor that suited us well.

Time flies when you do what you enjoy. We had finished working on the guest rooms, main hall, and the rough overall layout for today. Though, all of it had the potential to change once we stayed at the inn in Izu.

We all took a seat at the makeshift veranda and stared at the empty garden. We’d just visited Yamamoto-tei recently. The sight that we had seen then was still fresh in our minds. All I had to do was close my eyes to see the beautiful, verdant garden. I couldn’t help but feel our garden would look like that one day, and things would get even more exciting as our farming started coming together.

“Oh, I cannot wait!” Wridra had a huge smile on her face as she lay on her back. The rest of us also smiled as we lay on our backs, then noticed the sun was starting to set. Maybe someday, we would get our bedding ready on an evening like this and cook up a meal in the kitchen. Marie stretched, her eyes narrowing happily as if she was picturing the same thing.

“It really makes you see that the world isn’t all about money. I appreciate moments like this so much.” I understood her sentiment, but I couldn’t imagine how much money it would have cost to get a place like this in Japan. And yet, it was true that I did feel content. We laughed together, then headed toward the tent we had pitched earlier. I had work tomorrow, and once I was off, the raid on the third floor would begin.

Things were getting busier with Obon coming up. Along with my dreams, even Japan was turning into a place of recreation, so I kind of felt bad about having so much fun all the time.

As for whether or not it was comfortable sleeping in the tent, I had completely forgotten that I could sleep anywhere, any time.

Chapter of Midsummer, Episode 8: Typhoon

Warning

This may have been true for any household, but we usually had the news and weather report on in the morning. This was one of those mornings, and we were listening to the announcer as we put away the dishes. I noticed the windows were clattering, perhaps because the wind was particularly strong today.

Mariabelle stared at the TV with a serious expression. She hugged the backrest of her chair with her ears perking up and listened to the announcer's voice. When I stood next to her, her purple eyes looked up at me.

"The weather seems particularly bad today. Why do humans go to work even on days like this? It's unbelievable, really."

"Oh, it'll be here by noon, huh? That's earlier than the report," I said nonchalantly. I would have been glad if we got the day off, but unfortunately I didn't get any such notice. My boss may have ended up telling us to go home early at this rate, but I always went home at a fixed time, so things would have been no different.

Wridra overheard our conversation from the seat across from us and folded the newspaper she had in her hands. She had been wearing glasses as of late, perhaps because she liked the look. The Arkdragon certainly wouldn't need them to correct her vision.

"Hm, so this is known as a 'typhoon.' It rains quite often here, and it is not unusual for island countries near the sea to have rough weather at times." Every channel was reporting on the incoming typhoon. A third of the screen displayed a message warning of its approach, with giant letters that read "*Giant typhoon approaching!*" "*The Kanto region has been hit!*" "*Beware of strong gusts of wind!*" I couldn't blame Marie for being afraid, having never experienced one before. She hugged the backrest tight, focusing on the news reporter's voice.

I was worried about not being able to be with her for her first typhoon. Luckily, Wridra would be present. She was like a dependable older sister, so I felt much better with her around.

“Look, it says to beware. Are typhoons really that scary?”

“Well, Japan is close to the ocean. That means big typhoons often form from warm air. They’re known for the strong rainy winds, and depending on the region and scale, there are times when you can’t even stand upright.” As an aside, countries on this side of the Pacific Ocean called them typhoons; over in America, they were called hurricanes; and across the Indian Ocean, they were called cyclones. So they actually had three different names, depending on the region.

Marie opened her eyes wide. A horrifying image was displayed on TV, with umbrellas getting blown away and trees getting uprooted from the powerful wind.

Even the usually levelheaded Marie turned pale upon seeing the damage that was unfolding on the screen. I didn’t want to scare her too much, but this was a big one, so I had to make sure she stayed indoors.

“If you need to do any shopping, you should get it done before noon. We have ingredients for lunch, but not enough for dinner. But I’ll buy something on the way home, so don’t worry about it.”

“O-Okay. I’ll stay home and read some books then. Just be careful out there, okay? Call me if anything happens.” Now she was the one worrying about me. But I was used to typhoons, and I would only get a bit wet if anything, so I wasn’t too worried. I patted her silky hair in a gesture of gratitude, and she smiled, seeming to enjoy it.

I eventually put on my suit, Marie wished me a nice day, and I headed out for work.

I’m worried. I hope she’ll be okay. I should check in on her later. Such troubling thoughts ran through my mind as I walked through the powerful wind. The sky above was completely dark, and it wasn’t at all like my usual mornings.

Wridra was used to changes in climate.

Having lived for so long, she understood the power of nature better than anyone. She had witnessed people and animals perish beneath its unstoppable force and understood well how to deal with it. In her eyes, the apartment buildings of Koto Ward were as safe as you could get. The area was well prepared for a flood, and even if objects were tossed into the air by a gust of wind, they wouldn't have reached all the way up here.

However, the elf sitting at the table was completely restless and nervous. It was still ten o'clock and not much time had passed since Marie started reading her book. Her attention was so drawn to the sight beyond the window that she hadn't made much progress.

Many considered her home, the elven forest, to be a mystical place. Elves were protected by blessings of spirits, and they bestowed power to the spirits to achieve peace beyond what you would find in a human village.

Even though Marie had lived for a hundred years, it had only been a few years since she left her village. Not to mention, the Alexei Region was particularly stable in terms of weather. Marie was considered young among the elves, and she obviously hadn't experienced such a dramatic shift in weather before.

The sky turned darker as time passed, and she grew anxious as she watched the clouds grow more and more dense. Wridra closed the Izu travel magazine she had been reading and spoke to Marie.

"Japan is thoroughly prepared in the event of an earthquake or flood. These buildings look quite stable. I doubt anything will happen."

"Yes, I'm sure that's true, but...not knowing what could happen, I can't help but feel nervous. I'm finding it hard to just sit still." Wridra pondered for a moment. It seemed typhoons were quite a common occurrence, and even Marie understood there was no use in being afraid. But species that were close to spirits grew restless when they couldn't understand things with their five senses.

TVs were quite convenient, and the idea of watching where a typhoon would land from a distance was a concept that residents of the dream world could never have even fathomed. But being unable to see it in person only amplified

Marie's anxiety, and she was having trouble making any progress on her book.

And so, Wridra secretly thought it may have been better to just take her outside. Since Marie could not see spirits, it would have been easier for her to digest by going out there rather than watching footage of it. Otherwise, she would have just assumed it was something scary without understanding it.

"Kitase is too overprotective of her," the Arkdragon thought and let out a sigh.

"Then how would you like to prepare for the typhoon with me? For example, we could purchase ingredients for tonight's dinner in his stead."

"B-But he said he'll get it..."

"Hm. I have a feeling the weather will get worse, and Kitase's return will be quite late. I hear those trains are quite vulnerable to the rain and wind." Marie turned around with her eyes wide and stopped trying to read her novel. She had realized that Kazuhiro could be in greater danger than her. Wridra regretted mentioning Kitase at all and spoke to the timid little elf.

"Even if he does end up returning early, any leftovers can be used for tomorrow's meal. You will be in no danger with me." Marie blinked and thought about it.

Wridra's intuition was right most of the time. In fact, it had never been wrong so far. She must have figured it would be better to go shopping before the typhoon arrived.

There was a wallet at home just in case. Marie looked up at the clock on the wall, remembering how she had been told to go shopping before noon if she was to go.

She was still afraid of the shuddering windows, but she gave a small nod.

Marie put on some capris and a raincoat, then went outside and locked the front door behind her. She was disappointed to see that her friend was wearing her usual hot pants and shirt in contrast to her own fully weather-appropriate attire.

"Wridra, you seem to be underestimating typhoons. The winds are so strong

that they could blow the roofs right off of buildings!” Even as she rebuked the Arkdragon, Marie held tightly onto Wridra’s shirt and looked up to her with a worried expression. She had a childlike look in her eyes that Wridra found quite adorable.



“Why are you smiling? Hey, don’t pat my head like a child,” Marie protested.

“Hah, hah, my body moved of its own volition. No need to worry, I have brought an umbrella. I have come fully prepared,” Wridra said as she showed off her plastic umbrella. Marie seemed satisfied and turned away. The elf then reached out toward the empty air beside her. She had tried to hold the absent Kazuhiro’s hand out of habit.

Wridra gripped Marie’s other hand before she could make a sad face. It looked like she wanted to say something, but her feeling of discontent seemed to dissipate as the Arkdragon squeezed her hand a few times. Marie squeezed back as if to show she was okay.

“Okay, then let’s go. First, we’ll have to press the elevator button accurately. If we press the wrong one, we will be thoroughly embarrassed.”

“Hm, I wish to press it as well. These buttons are quite enjoyable to press for some reason. Not to mention, they light up!” Marie couldn’t help but smile at the overdramatic explanation. As they had such silly conversations, Marie found herself starting to have fun.

There was quite a lot of moisture in the roaring wind. When Marie stepped out of the elevator, she looked up at the dark sky and smelled the air. She realized rain was approaching.

“Let’s hurry, the rain clouds are a lot closer than it said they would be in the reports.” The two walked toward the supermarket through the dark skies and sense of unease, with the wind pushing at their backs and Marie’s raincoat flapping in the wind. As they steadily made their way along the riverbed, they came across a sight that was completely different than usual.

“Wow, the river water is so high up. It must really be raining hard upstream.”

“Hm, it is much more forceful than usual. The flood control system is quite impressive.” They could hear the river roaring loudly as they walked along the path beside the river. The water was much higher than usual, and it would have been quite dangerous if they slipped and fell over. However, a river thrashing about so wildly drew one’s eyes, whether they wanted to look or not. The sheer intimidating mass of it fascinated both humankind and elfkind alike. Just then,

black clouds could be seen flashing in the distance.

“Wait, was that...” Marie yelped at the booming thunder that followed, involuntarily giving Wridra’s hand a hard squeeze. Of course, she had seen lightning many times during her youth. However, this was the first time she had experienced thunder from such thick clouds. The skies rumbled some more, and then came a flash of light.

“Kya!” Marie clung to Wridra’s arm this time, then realized the change in her surroundings as she tried to calm herself.

The wind was getting much stronger than it had been when they had left the house. There was a heftiness to it as it pushed them from behind, and the smell of rain had grown more potent than before. Marie felt her knees go weak as it pushed her toward the river. “Hm,” Wridra said to herself as she watched.

The easiest thing to do now would have been to lead Marie by the hand and take her home. But Wridra recognized that her way of thinking had been changing as she spent time in this world. And so, she thought of Kitase’s face as she crouched down and stared into Marie’s eyes. She then spoke in a slow, gentle manner as he would have.

“I have heard that typhoons are something one can actually enjoy as long as you prepare properly.”

“Wh-What do you mean?”

“Hm, for example... You stock up on sweets, prepare a movie that is befitting of a typhoon, and watch it with me. How does that sound?”

A change came over Marie’s eyes, which had been full of fear just moments ago. Perhaps she pictured what it would be like to discuss what she enjoyed about the movie while eating delicious snacks. Although the typhoon still scared her, she somehow felt that it wouldn’t be so terrifying spending her time like that.

“You are more knowledgeable than myself when it comes to movies. I would like to watch something that fits the clamorous weather.”

“Oh, r-right. Also, there’s a dish I’ve always wanted to make. I think it would be the perfect fit for watching a movie, but...maybe it wouldn’t be a good idea

to spend money needlessly?” Kitase surely would have shaken his head at that. Wridra smiled, realizing that that man’s easygoing attitude had been affecting her own personality. She had to admit, she was completely fine with that.

“Hah, hah, I look forward to it. You should get plenty of cooking practice for when you watch movies with Kitase. I am sure he would be quite thrilled if you did.” The roaring winds were still quite terrifying. Still, the elf happily smiled and squeezed the dragon’s hand, then began walking forward. It was hard to believe she was too scared to take another step forward not too long ago.

And so, the two faced their first typhoon together.

The wind blew from all directions, causing their plastic shopping bag to flutter noisily. However, the tall woman holding the bag looked unconcerned, and she looked around her surroundings as her hair danced in the wind.

The trees at the park were swaying dramatically, scattering their leaves out onto the streets. Marie, who was being led by her hand, was beginning to have trouble walking against the violent wind without turning away from it.

Something splattered on her cheek, then another, and before she knew it, raindrops began falling all over the place. The sound of wind quickly turned into something heavy and solid, and Marie’s eyes opened wide.

“Ah! It’s raining! It’s coming down hard, we should hurry!”

“Yes, this is quite the bout of heavy rain. If I let go of your hand, you may go flying away, little elf. I would like to see whether you could truly fly up onto those rooftops.”

“Oh, stop it!” Marie wrapped her arms around Wridra from behind. The Arkdragon was caught off guard by this, but found herself feeling quite delighted. The dense clouds flying overhead were flowing as quickly as the river they had seen earlier. But as the raindrops fell upon their clothes and down their skin, they were having much more fun than they’d ever had in the rain before.

The lively sound of boisterous laughter and high-pitched screams seemed to deflect the sound of the rainy torrent. Their voices rang out all the way back home.

Marie pulled her soaking wet clothes off of her skin, then made a rather dissatisfied face. Even in the dark, unlit dressing room, the sound of the rain could still be heard.

“The raincoat was no match for a typhoon. There was no point in wearing one at all.”

Her clothes were completely wet. It was difficult to undress right away, and she complained the whole time as she struggled to get them off. She shivered as the chilly air touched her skin and water trickled from her hair and down her back.

When she peeked inside the bathroom, she saw that Wridra was turning the knob on the shower. Hot water began spouting out, filling the bathroom with steam.

“What a luxury it is to be able to dispense hot water immediately.”

“Wridra, you should stop appreciating it and get undressed. We have no time to take turns taking a shower when we’re both soaking wet. Let’s hurry up and get in.”

Wridra nodded, then threw her shirt and pants off at once. Perhaps she had seen this coming and chose to wear clothes that were easy to remove. As Wridra stood there with her alluring body on full display without a hint of modesty, Marie found that she was the one getting embarrassed for some reason. Her mouth flapped wordlessly for a moment, then uttered a complaint.

“You should learn to be a bit more modest. You’ll have to change properly in the dressing rooms when we go to Izu, you know?”

“Hm? But we can simply dress in the car. Agh, have it your way. I would rather not deal with a nagging little elf and human. I will use the so-called dressing room if you insist.” Wridra already knew that there was no arguing when Marie wrinkled her brow and made that disgruntled pout. She waved her hands in a gesture of surrender, and Marie seemed satisfied.

The rain was still pouring down upon Koto Ward outside, but the hot shower seemed to stave off its scariness a bit. “You were nearly blown onto the rooftops, little elf,” Wridra teased in the steam-filled bathroom. In the living

room, the DVD they had rented awaited them. Marie couldn't wait to watch it, and she felt that her fear of typhoons would be completely forgotten at this rate.

Just then, hot water was splashed onto her, and she burst into laughter for some reason. Perhaps it was because of the sheer joy she had seen on Wridra's face.

There was a proverb that went "Danger past, God forgotten." The typhoon that had struck fear into Marie's heart was changing shape inside of her. Although it was still a frightful day overall, she now understood that it wasn't as dreadful as she'd thought as long as she was prepared.

As the typhoon officially landed, it scattered massive beads of rain and storm winds all around Koto Ward. The windows in the dressing room shuddered and creaked terribly. However, it felt like the typhoon was getting farther away from the residence of a certain elf, perhaps due to the joyful voices reverberating in the bathroom.

Some time later, Wridra pulled the DVD out of the bag to reveal the picture of a dinosaur baring its fangs on it. The movie they had chosen to watch in the typhoon was focused on the ancient creatures known as dinosaurs. Marie had worried about whether it was fine for her to use Kitase's membership card, and she had been relieved when the employee at the rental shop didn't say anything about it.

"It was kind of fun having no other customers around because of the typhoon," Marie said as she opened the refrigerator to get some juice. She had already changed into her half-sleeve pajamas and had a bath towel hanging over her shoulder.

"Indeed, the city looked completely different today. The shutters were down all over the place. It reminded me of the country on the other side... Ah, this juice is for me? Mm, you will make a fine wife someday, Marie." Wridra smiled happily as she accepted the glass of peach juice Marie handed her.

There was nothing better than a glass of chilled peach juice after washing off the rain with a hot shower. The thick texture, refreshing aftertaste, and fruity sweetness were pure bliss as she drank it down.

“Simply heavenly. Hm, you seem to have a thorough understanding of the drinks in this country now. Do not tell me you have been trying out different drinks every day.” Marie’s shoulders twitched, but she didn’t turn around from where she stood in the kitchen. Judging by the way her long ears were swaying, Wridra’s guess was probably correct.

She took another sip of her refreshing drink, then stared out the window. The rain splattering against the glass window was getting steadily stronger and roaring loudly.

It was understandable that a child would find it intimidating. But if one simply stayed inside their room, their fear would never get resolved. Kitase was overprotective in that sense, but if he had been alive as long as Wridra had, he may have adopted her thought process as well.

Wridra considered just how much she had been influenced by him. She had been so tired from taking care of her whelps at first, but now she couldn’t get enough of it. That was part of the reason why she had been sending her duplicate to Japan less and less frequently. But it was difficult for her to stop visiting completely. After all, she loved Mariabelle and Kitase as if they were her own children. Perhaps one day, she would let them play with her actual offspring. If that day was to come, the manor they were building on the second floor of the labyrinth would be the ideal place to make it happen.

“Hah, hah, they say children tend to resemble their parents. I did not expect to become more human instead.” She could no longer stop her smile from spreading. Wridra never imagined she would become the doting parent type, but there wasn’t much she could do now that she was. She would continue to enjoy life and watch them grow. As such thoughts occupied her mind, a gentle scent filled the air. It was similar to roasting potatoes, and it seemed to be coming from whatever Marie was cooking. But what could this enticing smell have been?

She rose to her feet and peeked over Marie’s shoulder to find the appetizing food before her.

“Ah, a deep-fried dish. It smells quite wonderful. I shall try a bite...”

“When do you intend on changing out of that bath towel? We don’t allow

walking around wearing nothing but a bath towel in this house. You'd better get dressed, or no movie and snacks for you."

"No, wait! I will get dressed, so give me just a moment!" It was hard to believe Marie had been scared out of her mind from the typhoon earlier that day. Wridra nearly said this out loud, but instead she rushed away with long strides out of fear of getting the snacks taken away.

Marie sprinkled some salt onto the freshly fried potatoes. And so, the dish perfect for watching movies was complete...that which was commonly known as "fries."

However, it was vital for one to not underestimate this food just due to its simplicity. The starch had to be removed by soaking the potatoes in water, and then those potatoes had to be wiped down and fried twice on low and high heat. The girls' teeth sank into the fries' crunchy exterior and warm, soft interior. They smiled as they tasted the simple yet delicious flavor on their tongues.

"Ah, this is excellent! Truly the perfect snack for viewing movies. Not only are you a beauty, but you can cook as well. You will make a fine wife indeed."

"Hehe, I've been training every day, you know. If there's one thing Kazuhiro-san is good at, it's cooking. I can't let myself lose to him as a woman." *Hmm, she does not even deny being called a wife...* Wridra thought. She wanted to point this out, but decided the risk of having her fries get taken away was not worth it.

And so, the dinosaur movie began with the sound of the typhoon in the background. As an aside, they had picked this movie out of curiosity, since dinosaurs did not exist in their world.

"Now that I think about it, they are similar to the Koopah that appeared at the oasis."

"Oh, oh, look at that! So big." It was far more realistic than they had expected, and there was a surprisingly wide variety of species. It appeared they were largely separated between carnivores and herbivores.

"Humans are quite bold to use these creatures for profit. Oh, that herbivore

has such a long neck. Its beady eyes are adorable too.”

“They appear to be different from dragons. They do look great, however. I appreciate any powerful carnivores with sharp fangs.” The two looked at each other in wonder as they chewed on their fries.

The movie’s storyline was quite simple. Humans had revived dinosaurs in order to use them to make money, but they went out of control due to an accident, leading to mass panic.

They had rented the video purely out of curiosity for dinosaurs, but it became evident that the story was perfect to watch during a typhoon as it went on. As the men in the movie screamed helplessly, a powerful torrent was arriving in Koto Ward.

The pounding rain outside made them feel as if they were really in the movie, amplifying their tension and fear. It felt as if there was no escaping the terrifying creatures no matter how much they ran. This sense of horror was part of the fun, but since she hadn’t built much of a tolerance for this sort of entertainment yet, Marie simply froze in place with some fries still in her hand.

The colossal predator looked down upon one of the characters with its horrible, hungry eyes. Any being faced with such a creature was rendered completely powerless. And so, another one fell victim.

“I don’t like this. Where did all the cute herbivores go?”

“Hm, this one is quite powerful. Perhaps even stronger than an advanced Koopah.” The man on screen finally found the light he had dropped, and he switched it on to find comfort in the light.

However, the light revealed the giant eye of a reptile, and the way its pupils dilated struck fear into the hearts of the viewers. This was the scary thing about these thriller films. They always had a way of lulling the viewer into a false sense of safety before the scare. Although simple, this method was quite effective.

“Eeeeeek!” Wridra didn’t know how to react as Marie wrapped her arms around her from behind.

The Arkdragon realized she could whisper something scary into the elf’s ear to

get an even bigger reaction out of her. The thought was awfully tempting. At the same time, she was impressed that Kitase had been able to withstand such a reaction all this time.

Marie clung to Wridra with all her might, trembling from the sound of the rain slamming against the windows. Now that she was in Kitase's shoes, she was amazed that he could endure the sensation of Marie's beating heart and breasts pressed against him. There was no denying he had a lot of self-restraint.

"Hm, I suggest you do not ever watch movies with any other man."

"Huh? What are you... Oh no! It's chasing after the car!" Marie seemed rather distressed, but this movie was considered one of the kinder thriller films. After all, the good people survived in the end, and after the climax of the story, the night of horror came to an end and the viewer was rewarded with the sight of a beautiful blue sky. Marie let out a sigh of relief.

Then, Wridra noticed something.

She poked the elf's shoulder, then gestured toward the window. Sunlight could be seen outside. After the passing of a fierce storm, a fascinating view was always left in its wake. A beautiful, clear, blue sky, as far as the eye could see.

"Wow... It cleared right up." Seeing the look of blank amazement on Marie's face, Wridra couldn't help but burst out laughing. She then slid the window all the way open, letting in a rush of fresh air. The two took it in blissfully, their half-dried hair wavering in the refreshing wind.

"Mm, that feels nice!"

"Hah, hah, quite sensational. So this is what the wake of a typhoon is like. I must say, I could get used to this feeling."

It was hard to believe Marie was too frozen in fear to take a single step forward. "Yeah!" she said as she nodded in agreement to the dragon's words, her purple eyes alight with wonder. With the credits rolling behind her, she stared up into the blue sky.

At that moment, she had a feeling that the next time a typhoon came, she would wait for it with a heart full of anticipation and wonder.

The two stood shoulder to shoulder, enjoying the view of the summer sky together.

§

Mariabelle had been reading when she heard the front door open, and she stood up from her chair right away. It was, of course, Kitase, who appeared in a suit and wore a rare apologetic look on his face.

“Sorry I’m late, Marie. The train was delayed because of the strong winds, and I wasn’t able to buy any food for dinner. Wait, what smells so nice?” Marie took his bag with a cheerful expression, and Kitase loosened his tie as he sniffed the air, confused. The room was filled with the scent of spices and seasoning. He couldn’t hide his surprise when he saw what was in the kitchen.

“Wow, did you make curry? That’s amazing. I was hungry too.”

“Hehe, I thought you might be coming home late. Now, take a seat once you get dressed. We have the raid on the third floor coming up tonight, you know.” Wridra watched the two out of the corner of her eye while reading a magazine, and she found them to be a heartwarming sight for some reason. She couldn’t help it after seeing Marie’s efforts in acting as if she hadn’t been afraid of the typhoon. Not to mention, the look on her face said she couldn’t wait for him to try her curry.

Wridra took a sip of her coffee and hid her smile so the others couldn’t see. It seemed both the typhoon and Kitase’s day at work had ended without incident.

Chapter of Midsummer, Episode 9: Begin Third Floor Raid

The door separating the second and third floors extended far overhead, and it had simple, lattice-shaped patterns engraved into it. The giant jewel embedded in its center emitted a platinum glow, and it seemed to have a mechanism that unlocked the door once the second-floor master was defeated.

Dull, heavy noises rang out as the door opened, and dust that had accumulated over hundreds—no, thousands of years was stirred up with the movement. It rained down like black snow, revealing the staircase leading downward into the third floor to the Arilai soldiers.

The forty or so gathered there were fully armed, and each of them passed through the door without any words exchanged. Out of these members who were about to face the unimaginably challenging trials before them, the muscular man known as Zera muttered to himself,

“They slept in, didn’t they?”

“Shh! Can’t you see Sir Hakam is in a bad mood?”

The raid on the third floor was now officially underway, but the highly anticipated rookies of Team Amethyst, who had declared they would join just for fun, were absent. The raid leader, Hakam, simply stayed silent with a sour look on his face. Although their absence was due to being delayed by the giant typhoon on the way home, explaining the circumstances of the weather in another world would only result in confusion.

Thirty minutes later, Kazuhiho and company finally arrived on the scene and went straight to the headquarters to bow deeply in apology, as if they were talking to a superior at work. Although Kazuhiho had executed a perfectly respectful bow that made full use of his experience as a working adult, Hakam gave a simple response.

“I suppose you’re only doing this for fun, after all.” The young man’s stomach

churned with stress despite being in his dream.

Still, he had his own circumstances, and he couldn't have helped the fact that the weather and work duties caused him to be late. This was exactly why he had turned down the invitation to participate in an official capacity, but it was unlikely that he would be understood.

And even though Marie also made it clear that she was deeply apologetic, she had cleverly used words like "Because he was late..." to deflect any damage to the Sorcerer's Guild's and her own reputation.

Despite the dishonor of having to apologize and explain themselves, Team Amethyst also began their part in the raid.

After bowing several times, they finally headed down toward the staircase leading straight forward. Kazuhiho was rebuked by Marie the entire way there, but it seemed mankind was at the mercy of the weather, just as it had always been.

§

It was finally time for the raid on the third floor to begin.

Although we had already gotten a scolding on day one, there was no sense in worrying about that now. We would have plenty of time to redeem ourselves, and that was what Hakam would want us to do.

Our shoes clicked against the floor as we descended the staircase, and we soon noticed a change in the scenery. The walls were quite plain at first, but the light spirits floating around Marie revealed the Gothic engravings on the lower levels. The intricate designs were all over the pillars and walls, and it was clear that much more time had been spent on them compared to the other floors.

"Ancient labyrinths really aren't like anything else. They generate precious Magic Stones, and the books stored within are ancient and extremely valuable," Marie said in a fascinated tone. The patterns on the walls were eventually replaced with wall art. I noticed an illustration of a giant eyeball, and when Marie directed the light spirit away from the wall, the light revealed the entire picture.

"Hmm, is that a monster? It kind of looked like a Koopah from the first floor,

but I wonder why they're connected to those ropes. Maybe they used to be pets?"

"I'm sure there's something to that. These types of wall art tend to depict societal structures and rankings, or how life used to be during those times." The illustration was made with varying colors, and the wall art seemed to be looking at us and making a face as the light spirits floated around. I reached out and found that it was smooth and slippery to the touch.

We had to hurry to catch up with the rest of the raid teams, but I felt like it would be a waste if we just rushed past this wall art without taking the time to appreciate it. For us, experiencing other cultures like this was part of the enjoyment.

Rather than the content of the art itself, I wanted to feel the intent behind the artist who had made it. How did they think, and why did they leave these behind? As I touched the wall, I asked a question aloud to another member of Team Amethyst.

"Shirley, do you know anything about the third floor?" She shook her head in regret. Her bright blonde hair was tied back, and her straight-backed posture and clothing gave her a refined appearance. Judging by the fact that she still hadn't covered up her eyes, the other raid team members weren't anywhere close yet.

If the second-floor master didn't know about the third floor, perhaps the ancient people had bound her somehow so she would only protect the second floor. Marie looked up at the wall art as we continued walking, then spoke.

"Look, there are more and more humanoid monsters now. Some of them have many eyes or arms, but... Oh, there's even a dragon over there. The black color kind of reminds me of Wridra."

"It's almost like an encyclopedia of monsters. Giants, demons, winged people, specters, and angels? That's strange. Why are entities from the divine realm hanging out with monsters?"

Wridra turned around upon hearing her name mentioned. As usual, she was clad in black armor that was in the shape of a dress. She only smiled faintly as she watched us, and it didn't seem like she had any intention of explaining

anything about the wall art.

Our interest and curiosity grew further as the mosaic wall art became more and more complex. I knew we needed to hurry, but Marie and I couldn't take our eyes off of the art as we continued our descent.

The light spirits danced around in four directions, revealing the overall view of the wall.

"Oh, there are fewer monsters now, but they're getting bigger instead. Maybe that pudgy one ate the others?"

"Hmm, maybe this one is human? Looks like they're making a small colony here. Look over there, Marie. That drawing above the town... It's almost like Eden." Marie let out a small gasp, her eyes widening.

The mosaic art depicted a divine being descending from the skies above. Perhaps that was supposed to be a god. The concept of Eden was rooted deep within people, along with the idea that it would lead the souls of the brave to a land of respite. Doula's team belonged to a church with such beliefs, and there were theories that they borrowed the strength of gods to lead the people.

But something seemed to be bothering the elf girl.

"That's odd. The art mainly focused on monsters until now, but a god and Eden suddenly appear? And they're not depicted on opposing terms from monsters. In fact, they're treated as if they're equal."

I watched her profile and made a noncommittal "Huh."

I did understand what she was getting at. The monsters had been illustrated as if they were part of an encyclopedia until now, but it suddenly featured the appearance of a god and the people's lifestyles. Marie and I racked our brains trying to figure out why.

"But this shows that the concept of Eden has existed since ancient times," I noted.

"I find that strange in itself. Because, for example, your skills borrow the power of the gods, right?"

Indeed. Trayn, the Journey's Guide, refers to the god who watches over

travelers. He was said to not be bound by anything, and I would borrow his territory to travel over long distances. I nodded in response to Marie's question, and she nodded back.

"Yes, the god of travel is a particularly fickle and difficult one. He doesn't grant his power to others often, so many people don't even know of his existence. We still don't understand why they choose to bestow their powers to people. But judging by what's on this wall..." The story went on as we continued to make our way down the stairs. As humans grew in numbers, the forces of the gods also increased, and the conflict was split into factions. On one side were the gods leading the humans, and on the other side were the monsters.

We finally realized the artist's intention. The wall art was meant to depict the ancient war. Monsters devoured and struck each other down to expand their own territories. From there, the new beings known as gods rose to lead the people.

The wall art ended with an illustration of the Demon Wars, the battle between demons and gods that had been told across generations to this day. The main color was a vivid blue, and I could tell it must have been drawn by a renowned artist. Moved by the pure energy brimming from the sight before us, Marie and I just stared while holding each other's hands.

"And then the dark ages, the Age of Night, eventually turned to the Age of Mankind." Marie didn't respond, still completely entranced by the mosaic wall art. But there was a chance that none of this was true. This art was created by an ancient, and not someone from the Age of Demons or the Age of Night.

The final engravings were the same words we had read on the first floor.

The arrow unleashed from the morning star vanquished demons.

The shot would reach all the way to the fixed star with power that does not belong in this world.

Even the demon's thoughts were wiped out in a mere moment, and it would eventually return to the world.

For the morning star was the very thing that brought it into existence.

Beyond the atmosphere, a morning star fell out of the skies to get absorbed

into the origin of monsters. All creatures looked up to witness the sight, and the Age of Night had come to an end.

What had gone through their minds as they watched the same view after all of the conflict, battles, and destruction? This final picture must have been what the artist wanted to draw most. It was evident by the colors used, and Marie was in a daze at its brilliance as she spoke.

“The colors are so mystical...”

“It really draws you in, doesn’t it? Even though it’s a world far before our time.” She nodded.

At that moment, it seemed like we were able to feel a breath of air from ancient times.

§

Meanwhile, there was someone carefully surveying their surroundings.

Their body was covered in scales, and their eyes were those of a reptile.

According to what little information had been brought back from the scouting team’s reports, there was a problematic enemy somewhere within the third floor. This enemy had the peculiar ability to change the paths within the ancient labyrinth—a power that would make anyone experienced with the labyrinth go pale with fear.

One who loses their path of retreat becomes weak and vulnerable. For example, if someone were to get injured, they would still be deemed relatively fine. This was because they knew the conditions for how to get back alive. But if they lost their escape route, everything would be thrown out of the window, and they would be faced with a struggle to contain their terror. There was nothing more horrifying than a situation in which one had no choice but to press forward.

His name is Egriny. Monsters with names such as his were special. They were allowed a unique ability due to their impressive power, and they were strong enough to fight countless invaders by themselves. Rather, in his case, it would be more of a one-sided devastation than a fight.

After awakening from his long slumber, the first thing he did was wipe out the entire scouting party. The sight of the terrified humans desperately trying to flee and running around in circles was quite ludicrous. However, Egriny felt no satisfaction in dealing with them. It was simply a job.

His only jobs were to prevent any invaders from leaving this place alive and to turn them into nourishment for the ancient labyrinth itself.

After all, this ancient labyrinth was quite special, and it required massive amounts of energy now that it was active again. He had heard there had been many deaths just the other day, and they were getting quite close to the target number.

When the humans had appeared without learning their lesson, Egriny wondered why they would show up just to feed the labyrinth, and he raised the corners of his mouth in a strange-looking smile. He figured there was no use in trying to understand their thoughts.

And now, he was again conducting his duty. He was in the middle of closing off the giant door and making arrangements so it would not open unless he allowed it.

However, ancient labyrinths couldn't trap invaders inside completely. A labyrinth with no entrance and exit would not be a labyrinth. That was why there was always some sort of route with a passage leading all the way through. But due to his interference, the labyrinth had become even more terrible than before.

Those who went through this path would die, one by one. And once they all perished, this door would finally open...only to welcome the next victim.

However, there was one thing he hadn't taken into account.

It was Kazuhiho and company, who had slept in and showed up late.

The four stared at Egriny blankly, and he thought. He had to quickly decide whether it was best for him to eliminate them now or retreat.

Direct combat was not his strong suit, but he was strong enough to reach level 90. His vitality was infinite compared to that of a human, and with his body being enhanced by advanced magic, he could move so quickly that the

human eye could not follow.

Egriny's long tongue slithered out and swayed as he took a step closer. Ever since he had tasted humans recently, he was finding it harder to control his urge to devour.

He looked like an eight-meter tall lizard. He silently walked across the wall before landing on the ground. He only needed a few more steps to reach his top speed, moving so quickly that he left sound behind. The young boy's surprised expression immediately moved closer, and he rammed into him with an impact that reduced him into chunks of meat flying in all directions...or so he thought.

Confused, Egriny turned around to find the boy putting a hand to his chest and letting out a sigh of relief. It seemed he had missed. It was understandable, considering his body still wasn't in top shape from having just woken up from a long slumber. Still, missing the target on that sleepy-looking child was quite shocking.

The boy then evaded his second and third attacks, leaving him completely dumbfounded. But his eyes were like those of a lizard, so they didn't show much emotion.

Then, the situation suddenly changed like he was in a nightmare. Egriny thought he had passed by his target, but the boy somehow appeared right where he had stopped, swinging an impressive-looking weapon at him.

Yet the boy didn't manage to even land a glancing blow, and even if he had, it would not have had any effect on Egriny's thick exterior. More startling was the boy's agility that allowed him to catch up instantly.

Was it a dream, a nightmare, or an illusion?

As time went on, the boy's accuracy increased at an alarming rate.

He was talking to an elf who seemed to be a sorceress, and his movements as he evaded and attacked grew more logical every time they exchanged words. Even more troubling, he noticed the boy was attacking his source of enhancement magic. It was clear that the attacks were meant to pry open the armor covering his eyes and back, and Egriny was forced to retreat. An ominous feeling grew inside of him the longer the fight went on, like he had stepped foot

into a deep swamp. Not to mention, there was something strange about the boy's black-haired and blonde party members. They weren't doing anything to assist in the fight, but Egriny saw them through his special eyes and found that their outlines were blurry.

It was most likely for the best that he had decided not to engage with them any further. However, he should have come to this conclusion sooner.

As soon as he climbed over the wall, no human should have been able to catch him. But his nightmare was not over yet. The boy appeared suddenly out of the corner of his vision, then attacked his arm that he was using to grip onto the wall. He couldn't believe what was happening, considering he had climbed fifty meters up the wall in an instant.

It didn't stop there; the boy had created an unfamiliar flying creature out of a Magic Stone, relentlessly attacking Egriny from his position. The human wouldn't let up, no matter how much he ran.

Before he knew it, his hardened exterior was terribly damaged, and he could no longer put strength into his limbs.

He couldn't understand why he was being beaten so badly by someone who seemed far lower in level than himself. The elf occasionally shot magic at him from below, but he had been dodging those each time. It seemed he could ignore her for now.

Fwooooooom!

Then, he heard that unpleasant sound. The boy's sword was emitting a grating noise that made him picture the image of a flying meteor. What was that thing? But this was also an unexpected opportunity. As long as he could use his amazing agility to dodge the attack, he should have been able to make himself an opening to escape.

He landed upon the ground, standing face-to-face with the human.

Egriny was completely focused, waiting for the exact moment to move.

And yet, this nightmare was still unending. Stone walls suddenly emerged from all directions, and he was shocked to find his vision completely obscured.

It was too late to realize that the elf girl he had been ignoring had set up a trap for him. The walls covering him from four directions gradually increased in thickness.

The problem was, these were walls that Egriny couldn't control. They were constructed by powerful spirits, so it would take an extraordinary amount of time to break them down. He still hadn't shown them his magic that could reconstruct the labyrinth, so it was by pure coincidence that they countered his ability. He just so happened to get captured alive, and there just so happened to be a small hole in one of the walls that was about ten centimeters wide, and the human boy just so happened to have a powerful attack that could vanquish Egriny's massive vitality.

Vwoooooom! The monster stood dumbstruck as the sound grew stronger.

It couldn't be. How was this possible? Could he really perish just by mere coincidence like this? He was an absolute and powerful being, and he was not the type to die like a frog that got stepped on by accident. He was the one who would bring despair and death upon the third floor.

Stop...

A brilliant light like that of shining stars erupted into the small opening in the walls, and a shock wave burst from the human's sword. Egriny let out a sigh of surrender in the end, the impact pressing against him from the front and reflecting in all directions, vaporizing his body.

§

The door opened with a heavy, grating noise.

There was an unexpectedly powerful enemy along the way, but we had just entered the third floor, so we would surely run into more strong monsters here. It made me consider that the third floor was a far scarier place than I had imagined. I rubbed my face, realizing that I was beginning to smile.

Well, uh, it's not that I like to fight. It's more of a means to relieve stress from work. That is, it feels nice to get some exercise, and it's not that I enjoy killing or anything... Oh, this was no good. I was starting to make excuses in my own head.

I considered that maybe there was something wrong with working adults, but as I was about to touch on something I probably shouldn't have, the door fully opened with a loud thud.

The other raid teams were waiting there, and it seemed they were just discussing what to do after the door had suddenly closed on them. They commented about us being late, but we were able to open the door and defeat that unnamed monster on the way. That pretty much canceled out our tardiness in my book.

I was then treated to a rough headlock by Zera. With the terrible enemy we'd yet to meet that was going to make us lose our way inside the labyrinth, I was made painfully aware of the fact that life wasn't fair.

Just then, Marie approached from behind and hopped onto my back.

"Are you okay? Still tired from that first fight?"

"Oh, no, it was a great warm-up. But I heard there's a unique enemy on this floor that's going to make a certain cute elf get lost," I replied, and a beautiful smile spread across her face. It made me wonder why she didn't seem afraid of getting lost, but come to think of it, we had an Arkdragon with us who could summon shadow gates. So yeah, she really didn't have much reason to be scared.

"Oh my, that's quite frightening. Would you come and get me if I ever got lost?"

"If you get lost, you should leave a trail of snacks like in the book we read the other day. That way, I could follow it to find you. So, what did you bring today?" I asked. She giggled happily, then reached into her top and brought out some chocolate. It was in the kind of box that you could open and shake to make the chocolate come out several pieces at a time. But the look on her face told me she would never drop any of it on the ground even if she got lost.

I looked over to find Shirley crouching down to the ground. I wondered what she was doing and approached her with Marie still on my back, then noticed she was touching the corpse of the monster we had defeated earlier.

It had been hit with a devastating impact. The monster no longer retained its

shape, and it had been reduced to a pile of white sand. I couldn't help but wonder what Shirley was doing, when the remains would get scattered with a gust of wind. Curious, I lowered Marie from my back and peered over to find out.

"Shirley, what are ya doing over there?"

I just noticed Shirley had already covered her eyes with her veil. She turned around, and her lustrous lips formed a smile. She usually made such childlike expressions, but she had a strangely mature air about her when she was out in public like this. But being a reaper, she was quite the unusual woman, and we were highly interested in what sorts of powers she had. I'd thought she would fight with a scythe like she had before, but she didn't seem to have any sort of weapon on her.

Shirley poked the pile of sand with her fingertip. It then began to melt suddenly, and it transformed into something like clay.

"Wow, I've never heard of anyone that can alter a defeated monster," Marie said, and I was just as surprised as her. Monsters began to break down as soon as they died, eventually getting reduced to ashes and vanishing completely. But the substance it had become was now bubbling, growing smaller as it became more dense. A metallic item then appeared, and Shirley picked it up with her fingertips.

"Oh, what kind of key is that...?" Shirley watched Marie's surprised expression, then placed the item in her hand and smiled as if to say, "For you."

It was a strange-looking key. The design was simple, and I could faintly feel some magic from it. I opened the status screen right away to check our belongings, but the description only said "Unlocks an invisible keyhole."

"Hmm, an invisible keyhole? Maybe there's a special door somewhere in the ancient labyrinth." I found it curious that it mentioned an invisible keyhole rather than a hidden door. We had discovered treasure chests and secret doors before, but we were able to open them normally by using magic. Of course, that one time our very own Arkdragon had busted a treasure chest wide open was an exception.

We may eventually need the key for something, so I decided to put it in my

bag for safekeeping.

“Oh, look! The sand is changing shape!” The clay from earlier had been changing while we were distracted with the key. I turned around to see what Marie was talking about and saw that it had turned into the shape of a lizard covered in a smooth exterior. It blinked its beady eyes, and it sort of looked like a lovable pet.

The lizard jumped onto Shirley’s arm and stopped there. Seeing Marie watch with fascination, Shirley moved closer as if to say, “You can pet it if you want.”

“Oh, wow, may I? It won’t bite, right? Are you sure? O-Okay, here I go...”

She gingerly reached out and touched the strange newborn creature. She pressed it lightly with her finger, but it didn’t have any sort of negative reaction. I was surprised by how docile he was, considering we had just fought him recently.

Before I knew it, Marie was rubbing the lizard’s chin, and it responded by squealing in delight. Marie’s purple eyes lit up.

“So adorable! What’s your name?”

Egriny.

The word suddenly popped up in my mind, and my eyes widened in surprise. Marie was making the same face, so it must have projected its thoughts to all of us at the same time. It was a strange creature indeed if it was capable of sending words directly into our minds.

Shirley, who was all smiles as she watched our exchange, made a large book appear out of nowhere. It was too big to fit in a pocket, and it was quite dense.



She flipped through empty pages and reached the “creatures” and “reptiles” category, and I wondered what she was up to now.

Maybe it was time to say goodbye. Egriny lightly nibbled on Marie’s finger, then hopped up onto the book. The next moment, he was gone.

“Oh, did he just melt into the book? Look at that, this picture looks just like him.”

“You’re right. It says ‘Egriny’ right above his head. Maybe Shirley can put monsters into books.”

“Hm, there’s something strange about this book too. Maybe we should call it the Monster Book. But they contain actual monsters rather than just pictures. Your powers are very unique and interesting, Shirley.”

She seemed pleased by the compliment. Shirley hugged her book to her chest, then mouthed, “Thank you.”

We were surprised to see so many new things, but Shirley was the keeper of the verdant second floor and a reaper that presided over life and death. It was clear that her powers would not be the same as those of a normal adventurer. It was hard to predict the scale of what she would achieve moving forward, but blushing happily before us, she looked just like an ordinary young schoolgirl.

§

Now, there just so happened to be several men also gathered at the same floor as Kitase and his group. They were in a dimly lit stone room, and judging by the fur blanket on the ground, they had just finished taking a short rest.

The reason they were able to arrive quicker than the Arilai raid party was related to the blood coursing through their veins. They were far closer to monsters than humans, allowing them to pass right by the monsters in the labyrinth.

The members gathered here were considered elite fighters. They had lost many of their members in an ambush on the previous floor, and the ones who fell first were those less skilled than the survivors.

“Well, we basically got rid of the weaklings dragging us down. Not a

problem.” The speaker was a sly-looking man with an unkempt beard. He had once fought with a certain young man at the oasis and more than held his own.

The woman clad in armor known as Kartina was enraged by this comment, and she walked up to him from behind, then grabbed him by the shoulder.

“Bastard! You flee at the first sign of danger, and you dare call my men weaklings?!”

The man observed the fury in Kartina’s eyes in silence, then exhaled from his nose and grabbed her arm. He shifted his weight to lift Kartina off of her feet, then threw her over his shoulder and mercilessly slammed her against the ground.

It was less of a skillful technique and more like an adult overpowering a child with strength alone, and the woman lay there with the wind knocked out of her. The man immediately cranked Kartina’s arm back, forcing her to crawl on her belly.

The difference in power was plain to see, and the reason was simple.

If a man and woman had equal training, the man would have the advantage of strength over the woman. In order to fill that gap, Kartina had traveled across countries to train in the sword, but her face got slammed into the ground before she could make use of it.

After a slight pause, the man lifted the woman’s red-soaked face. He then whispered into her ear.

“Hm... Now you know exactly why your men all got caught. Little miss leader of weaklings, pretending to be a knight. What’s wrong? Your nose is bleeding.”

Laughter broke out all around Kartina, and she felt herself growing hot with rage. Although the feral blood within her had been diluted over generations, it awakened something inside her, causing her claws and fangs to grow sharper. Soon, she would only see red and massacre those around her in a fit of unbridled fury. Just as the thought crossed her mind, a toe dug into her side with a heavy thud. She twitched and shuddered, then hurled up her stomach acid all over the floor.

“What are you doing, Kartina? Are you trying to defy me?” The kick didn’t

come from the same man who had thrown her on the ground. She looked up with fluid still dangling from her mouth and saw a man standing there with an emotionless expression. He was the leader in charge of this plan. He moved to punch Kartina's original attacker to punish him as well, but he immediately released his hold on Kartina and leaped away.

"Silence, you animals. Get in the way of the mission, and I'll feed you to the monsters right now." His command was like a weight upon the entire group, and they all went quiet immediately. There was a powerful presence about him, which was necessary in order to handle a rough group such as this one.

The captain scoffed, then turned his back on the others.

The "mission" the captain had mentioned earlier was to take control of the relic here on the third floor. Some hooded dark sorcerers sat on the ground, casting a curse to control the terminal that had been left by the ancients.

Due to the density of the magic being channeled, the complicated patterns emitted by the curse could be seen even with the naked eye. A beam of light extended toward what looked like a giant water tank. It seemed they had made a breakthrough, and the array of curses began binding to the terminal and water tank one by one.

The wisdom of the ancients soon became unraveled. An image appeared in the air with an electronic *vwoom*, and they all raised their voices in surprise at once.

"Ah! So this is the layout and the position of each monster on the third floor!"

"Level 82... 99... These numbers are unbelievable. But with this, we can crush any invader who dares step foot inside!"

The monsters being displayed were all high in level. The numbers representing the power of the monsters were all far higher than they had expected. If they could control these monsters, they could repel the Arilai forces with ease. This was why the captain had said they would understand soon enough a few days ago. Those who were gathered there had a glimmer of hope in their eyes.

But one person among them, the one who led the rest of the team, uttered to

himself that something was off. There should have been a unique monster that could change the structure of the labyrinth. He furrowed his brows as he read the list, not seeing its name written anywhere. Still, there was no time to waste. His soles clicked on the floor as he took a step forward.

“Let us begin. It’s time to eradicate the dogs of Arilai.” The corners of his lips curled up into an intense smile, and he began to operate the terminal. On the display, a high-level monster called a Heat Dragon appeared.

The giant had been casually strolling about the stone-paved labyrinth until now, but it suddenly stopped. It then looked around with its long neck and received a signal from the central control.

The dragon changed directions, and sparks flew out of its sharp claws as it rushed forward. It batted its wings once to fly right over the railing. A steep cliff was just ahead, but it plummeted into the darkness without hesitation. From the way it moved, it obviously knew that the invaders were down below.

The dragon that had been ordered to wipe out all of its enemies was a terrifying monster over level 100. True to its name, the Heat Dragon could expel a viscous fluid that was much like lava. Of course, any human it touched would be engulfed in flame and burn to a crisp.

Dragons were special creatures.

They had an organ known as a dragon core inside them, and the magic and life force it generated was practically infinite from a human’s perspective. Even if someone managed to decapitate a dragon by some miracle, it could continue fighting without its head for a month straight.

The Heat Dragon expanded its blood-red wings and took flight. It would soon turn the foolish intruders to dust. Afterward, the battle would be taken from the dim labyrinth up to the surface.

§

When Marie and Shirley returned to the others, the groups were in the middle of a mid-walk discussion. It seemed they were deciding on the direction moving forward now that the four teams and Gaston’s midsize organization would be working together.

The discussion centered around the leaders of each group, Kitase being one of them. Marie stood next to him, and Kitase greeted her with a “Welcome back.”

“Marie, this was in the preliminary report, but Magic Tools become unstable on the third floor. Our link isn’t working properly either, so the map won’t be of much use. We should assume we won’t be able to get in contact with HQ for a while.”

“Oh, is that so? So we’re basically cut off from the outside world right now.”

“Well, I figured this would happen. Let’s register our raid group while we can.” The group nodded in agreement to Zera’s comment, then each of them began operating their terminals. Even if the teams were separated, now they would be able to get a general idea of their positions through Mind Link Chat.

The red-haired woman, Doula, who had been checking on her Magic Tool until now, then scanned her surroundings.

“Look, there are morion growing all over this place. That must be what’s interfering with the flow of magic here. The map is still working, but the range is much more limited.” Kitase could see that the edges of the map were blurred out. Since Aja’s support couldn’t quite reach them here, this was the extent of what the map could display. If the structure of the labyrinth was changed in this state, the party would be in immediate danger.

Puseri, the master of Team Diamond, turned around with her twilight hair swaying.

“We will need to stay vigilant for this monster that can make us get lost. Let us alert each other if the map changes at any time.” Everyone voiced their affirmation at once.

Although the raid team had been put together in a hurry, each member was highly experienced. In fact, Team Amethyst, who had spent most of their time freely rather than in organized groups like the others, was most likely to drag the others down. Even now, they stared at the wall art and furnishings with great interest, and they didn’t seem too reliable compared to the others.

There was a rail in the straight corridor, and beyond it was a sheer crevasse that was too deep to see the bottom. There was no way one could survive a fall

from that height. And since it was completely silent without even the sound of wind to accompany them, a forlorn feeling filled the air as soon as the conversations stopped. If they hadn't been in a large group, the feeling of solitude may have been too much. That was, for anyone other than Team Amethyst.

The group continued forward, voicing their remaining concern. The supplies that had been sent from headquarters were limited.

Doula's Team Andalusite could easily cure the injured due to being servants of the divine, but food and consumables were an absolute necessity. But the path from the country to the oasis to the second floor was quite a long one, and they were also dealing with the interference on their Magic Tools. This meant they had to be more careful than usual. The boy understood this, but he voiced his complaint anyway.

"They said they would send as many supplies as we needed for this mission. I asked for some tea, but to think all we got were some stale tea leaves."

"Do you really intend to ask Sir Hakam and Great Aja for tea? Unbelievable. Aw, I'm getting thirsty from talking." The boy agreed, then pulled out his canteen with practiced hands. It was an unusual metal container, and they fell silent as they watched him pour out steaming hot tea as if it had just been freshly brewed. Just as they tried to ask about the strange canteen, it happened.

Doula raised her hand from the front, and everyone immediately stopped. The silence was deafening. They waited for some time. Then suddenly, a grating sound could be heard from a distance.

Screeeeeeech! The destructive sound reverberated from above, signaling that something was approaching with devastating momentum. Some of the men looked cautious, but the unwavering Team Diamond led the way.

Puseri, who likely had the greatest defense of the group, raised her large twilight shield. But even she couldn't help the bead of cold sweat from rolling down her cheek. Whatever was approaching was just that intense.

Booom, vwoosh...!

Something massive came crashing down, sending cracks down the stone pavement all around it. The thing that tore through the railing with ease and fell through the steep wall above was...

“A d-dragon!!!” Someone’s voice cracked as they screamed in terror, and the Heat Dragon demonstrated why it had earned its name. It opened its bright red gills, and its exhalation was so hot it warped the air around it. Something roared within its lungs like a scorching flame as it charged up its dragon breath. Once that breath escaped its lungs, the number of casualties would be calamitous.

But despite the sudden appearance of the dragon, two people’s eyes glinted with amazement.

One of them was a young boy who claimed this world was like a dream and held a deep admiration for fantastical monsters such as this one.

“Wow, it’s so big! They’re really something else when you see them in person.” He began walking forward unsteadily as if mesmerized, and the other person made their move at the same time.

The old man was adept at controlling his energy, and he hid his presence from detection. He then vanished completely, unable to be noticed even by the dragon’s acute sense of smell.

It was Gaston. The white-haired old man who had a reputation for being undying spoke in his usual easygoing manner, then removed the dragon’s wing without being seen... Or so he thought.

“Ka ha ha, take th—” Before he could finish his sentence, the dragon stopped. Its infernal eyes were staring right at a certain individual. He may have imagined it, but it looked like the dragon had bowed its head. Even the rumbling growl almost sounded like an apology.

As the group pondered what in the world was going on, the Heat Dragon vanished beyond the railing. Its retreat was just as abrupt as its appearance. Gaston and the others were left dumbfounded by the sudden disappearance of the massive creature.

Meanwhile, Kitase continued to stare. He was looking at the tall woman with black hair that reached down to her waist, who said, “Yes, I apologize,” but the

others couldn't understand her words.

Wridra was a far superior being to normal dragons, so her own kind could recognize her even if she concealed her presence. She was like a lord attempting to blend into society.

As for the old man who was still frozen with his sword raised, the others only gave him a cursory glance before forgetting about him, and he was left with no real chance to shine.

It was around this time that he realized the battlefield was no longer the one he once knew. The time when battle meant climbing over the corpses of your allies and only seeking the heads of your enemies was long gone. The old man sheathed his sword and let out a sigh.

A few days ago, he had spent a great sum of money to invite a certain girl to his manor.

Her name was Hakua of Team Diamond, a plain young girl with long, chestnut-colored hair. She had a special ability that allowed her to read the future using astrology, and she had recently been forbidden from using her powers for outsiders. The reason this policy had been changed may have been related to the capture of their leader, Zarish.

Perhaps most people would have a question in mind if they had the opportunity to ask about the future. In Gaston's case, he had a very peculiar one.

"When am I gonna croak?" Most people would tilt their head at such a question. It wasn't as if he was suffering from a serious illness or had suicidal tendencies. The old man simply wanted to know. He had overcome too many battles to count, and he wondered when this senseless life would end.

"The ancient labyrinth that awaits you will be your place of death." The old man's eyes widened. Strangely, Gaston felt strength coursing through his body now that he knew the end was near. He was delighted to face the finale to his life that had gone on for too long.

His expression changed as if he was in the midst of battle now, then he slapped his knee and stood up with vigor. And so, he had willingly joined the

highly unpopular mission on the third floor.

So why? This isn't what I signed up for. Gaston let out a heavy sigh for some reason. Perhaps it was because an elf girl was gleefully creating a large stone oven using a stone spirit. Or perhaps it was the appetizing scent that came from the flattened dough that a young boy threw into it.

The scent was enough to make the old man's stomach growl even though he wasn't particularly hungry.

The group had decided to take a break at a large room they came across. Gaston didn't mind this. After all, it was important for a warrior to keep himself in optimal condition at all times. However...

"Why are you cooking in the labyrinth, you fools?!"

"Whoa!"

Gaston had risen to his feet as he shouted, and the kid with the stupid name, Kazuhiho, trembled in surprise.

Why was no one else pointing out the absurdity of the situation? They had been happily cooking together, and some of them were even cheerfully lining up with plates in their hands. He could at least let the members of Kazuhiho's Team Amethyst slide. But seeing even the dark elf from Team Diamond join in on the nonsense was too much. The boy made fine adjustments to the heat using a stick with a flattened end as he looked at Gaston with an apologetic expression.

"I'm sorry. I did think it might be a bad idea to cook here, but we already decided we're making pizza today."

"Huh? What do you mean you 'decided' that? A man should just shut up and eat his military rations. That's how it's always been since I was born. The hell?" The Fire Lizards seemed to have noticed the commotion and stared at them from inside the stone oven. The way they blinked their beady eyes was enough to make anyone forget about their rage. More distracting than anything was the boy's blissful smile.

"I've always wanted a pizza oven, so I was amazed that we could make one so easily. The grains and herbs you can get from Arilai are such high quality, so I'm

sure you could make some excellent pizza with them. We could even use some oil and..." Surprisingly, the sleepy-looking runt started running his mouth out of nowhere.

And why was that black-haired woman glaring at him from the back as if to say, "Don't interrupt us, asshole"? He had to admit, he felt his stomach tightening from her gaze.

How can this be? I didn't even yield to that brat Zarish... He was right to be confused. The old man Gaston had defeated over ten thousand enemies who stood before him. And yet, he instinctively knew this woman was on another level.

"Oh, I think it's about time. Let's bring them out," the boy said.

"Good! I'm starving!" The eruption of aroma that came out was almost overwhelming.

Red tomato paste had been applied to the circular pizza dough, with plenty of bacon on top. The bubbling melted cheese filled the air aggressively with its delicious scent.

The smell made the elves squeal with delight, and the plates started getting passed around. Gaston gulped, managing to swallow his saliva before it dangled from his mouth, causing him to swallow his words at the same time.

"Oh, Gaston," the boy called out as he cut through the crispy crust with a crunch.

It wasn't as if Gaston expected to get anything, but he didn't want to be rude. He didn't bring a plate with him, but he supposed he would bear the heat and have a slice.

"I'm sorry if we're bothering you. Please don't mind us and enjoy your military rations." By the look on the boy's face, Gaston could tell he wasn't being sarcastic or malicious. However, that was the moment he had decided to come to hate Kazuhiho. He felt the urge to kill the brat growing inside him.

At the same time, the old man pressed his fingers against his wrinkles and thought to himself painfully. *Maybe this is where I die.* No, it couldn't be. It was impossible. There had to be a glorious end more fitting for him.

Gaston groaned to himself in agony as he opened the seal of his military rations. He had once loved the smell of clay and the chewy consistency from the bottom of his heart...

§

The entirety of the dim room was at a loss for words.

The spellcaster controlling the terminal, the leader of the group, and each of the team members in the room couldn't believe their eyes. The leader of the group stared with an icy look in his eyes, but he was secretly struggling to maintain his composure.

The Heat Dragon fled from battle? In a matter of seconds? It even looked like the dragon was bowing its head, but what could that have been about? It must have been some sort of error, so he gave an order to send another patrolling dragon that wasn't bound to any particular area to attack the group, but...

"S-Sir, it isn't working. There's no response at all!"

"Is this their will? Are they communicating among each other somehow? Could it be that the entire network of dragons is defying our order?!" The spellcasters raised their voices in a panic, and the man concealed his distress as he tried to figure out the situation.

Something was wrong. They hadn't expected this situation in the slightest. Ever since the second floor, he couldn't shake the feeling that there was some greater entity lurking among the raid team. The boy who had staggered closer to the dragon without putting his guard up and the old man who instantaneously hid his presence came to mind.

One of the spellcasters controlling the terminal raised his voice. Unlike earlier, there was a hint of hope in his tone.

"I found one! There's an even more powerful monster on patrol. The terrifying being that can cast necromancy and controls countless souls of the dead... A Lich!"

"Good, send it immediately! Destroy them!" The Lich raised its giant scythe to its shoulder, blood dripping from its tip.

Its jet-black robe billowed in the wind, and its skull was covered in runes that allowed it to activate its magic immediately. The runes also served to interfere with wide-range incantations, but they didn't interfere with necromancy. This was what made the Lich so terrible. They had no issues lopping off their enemy's head no matter how much they begged and cried for mercy, and the corpses would only add to the ranks of the army of the dead.

The Lich received the orders to annihilate the raid team, responded with a simple "Understood," then sank into the ground, dragging the countless blood-soaked undead along with it.

§

"Ah," I heard someone say, and turned around to find a semitransparent, skeleton-like monster peeking from the door. It was locking eyes with Shirley, who just so happened to be carrying her plate at the time, so I figured they knew each other and continued cooking. The scythe it carried on its shoulder and skeletal appearance did remind me of Shirley.

The monster with empty eye sockets and Shirley continued staring at each other for some time. Then, the monster whose name I didn't know disappeared behind the door.

"Who was that, Shirley? Friend of yours?" Shirley shook her head, so I guessed not. I was busy anyway, so I decided not to think about it.

Anyway, it was time for the pizza tasting party.

I had recently come to realize that we could just bring in ingredients like this whenever we didn't have time to make meals beforehand. The way people looked at us bothered me a bit—well, it bothered me a lot, but since the girls had told me, "I'll never eat military rations," and "You can eat them by yourself," I didn't really have much of a choice. I had a feeling Team Amethyst was a bit more happy-go-lucky than the others, but our group consisted of an elf, an Arkdragon, and a former floor master, so perhaps it was best not to worry about it so much.

I was starting to get used to our eating habits, and I had brought our pizza dough into the dream world. After mixing some bread flour, salt, water, and olive oil, then kneading it all together and letting it rest, all it needed were some

toppings.

It was better to thin out the dough to get a crispy texture and particular flavor. We had scattered cheese, bacon, and some basil-like herbs we picked from the second floor on top of it, then cooked it up in the stone oven. This was Italian-style pizza, which was a bit different from American style.

But with three Fire Lizards lying inside the stone oven, it did make me question what pizza was. They were lounging around on their backs, looking up with their beady eyes when I brought them the pizza dough. It felt more like bringing food into a sauna room than cooking. Marie, who was controlling the spirits, tugged at my sleeve.

“How’s the fire? I could make them work harder if you’d like.”

“No, I think we’re good. The air on the third floor is pretty cold, so the stone oven is nice for keeping us warm too.” Drawn by the warm air and smell, people started gathering around us. The ones to make the first move were the engaged couple, Zera and Doula, and curious people like Eve the dark elf. They stared unabashedly at the stone oven, and Eve had even brought her own wooden plate.

She had also partaken in portable meals up until last time, so maybe she instinctively knew to bring a plate? No, it couldn’t have been... I shook my head. Just then, Zera walked over to speak to me.

“Huh, you have some weird cooking wherever you come from, Kazuhiho. You mind letting us try a bite?”

“Oh, hi, Zera. Sure, of course you can have a bit.” We only had a limited amount of food, and there wasn’t enough time or resources to pass them out to everyone present. I felt bad, but I had to keep it to just a taste as requested.

After waiting for some time, I took the pizza out of the stone oven. The cheese melted nicely, and the roasted color made everyone’s eyes light up with excitement. The delicious aroma filled the room as I sank my knife into the well-cooked crust.

Yeah, there was nothing like fresh-baked pizza. Not to mention, we had used a high-heat cooking method that wasn’t possible to do at home, so I couldn’t

help but feel giddy.

I placed a slice each on Marie's, Wridra's, and Shirley's plates. Then I cut another slice into thirds and placed one of them on Eve's wooden plate. I had already placed the toppings on another piece of flattened dough, so I tossed it into the stone oven. Marie looked at me apologetically.

"I feel bad about eating before you when you're doing all the cooking."

Her eyebrows were furrowed in a frown, and Wridra stood behind her with her mouth wide open. She had stopped herself from taking a bite at the last second. To my surprise, it seemed she had learned to read the room.

"No, no, I want you to taste it while it's fresh. It won't taste as good the longer you wait, after all." I gestured for them to dig in, and Marie nodded hesitantly.

It was customary to grab pizza without using a fork while it's piping hot. They felt the heat on their skin as they picked it up. They gingerly put it in their mouths, cautious to not burn their tongues. They would soon raise their voices in delight. The crust crumbled easily as they bit into it, and the strong cheesy flavor of my favorite, Parmigiano Reggiano, filled their mouths. It melted together with the bacon fat, and the acidity of the tomato sauce balanced out and improved the taste to new heights.

The fragrance of the pizza crust, flavor of the sauce, and umami from the cheese assaulted their taste buds as they sank their teeth in. It disarmed their caution from the heat, and they continued chewing in order to deliver more flavor with each bite.

"Mm! Mm! Mm! So good...!"

"Nnnh! This crispy texture! Aaargh, the cheese is criminally delicious!"

It made me happy watching them as they stretched out the cheese with smiles on their faces. Shirley's eyes also lit up with joy, and her outline was getting a bit blurry... I tried signaling with my eyes for her to be careful and calm down. She raised both fists in a victorious pose, which only made me worry a bit more.

"Mmm, the cheese is so stretchy! Nnf, nng, I love pizza!"

“Hng! The thin crust emphasizes the cheese even further! The crispy texture is simply divine!” I wanted to correct her pronunciation a bit, but I kept it to myself.

In any case, I felt fortunate just watching the happy expressions on these beautiful women as they enjoyed good food, including the part where they slapped me on the back and shoulder. Once they finished eating, they brought me their plates and asked for seconds.

But the one who loved the pizza the most out of all of them was Eve the dark elf. Her eyes had practically turned into hearts, and she sat there dreamily with her mouth half open for some time after she had finished eating.

I had a vague feeling that she would like junk food, but it was somewhat concerning seeing her breathing heavily with her eyebrows in an inverted v shape. She stared at me expectantly, and I couldn't help but spoil her a bit.

“Eve, would you like another slice?”

“Can I?! Yay, yay, yay! Thank you, Kazu!” She leaped at me and hugged me from the side, and I blinked in surprise.

I felt somewhat like her older brother, but she was far taller than me in the dream world. Her words and actions could be quite severe, but she was like a child when there was something she wanted. Though, the way she still clung on to me from behind as she made impressed noises at the stone oven was a bit troublesome.

I proceeded to make a second, then third slice, and everyone's stomach started to fill. Wridra could still have eaten plenty more, but I did want to eat some myself.

We were in the ancient labyrinth, so no one really minded that we stood while eating against proper etiquette. As we had some tea, Zera made a comment.

“Come to think of it, that old man Aja said he'd send us supplies if needed. Maybe he'd send us ingredients like these if we ask? We have some skilled team members, so I think they could cook something up instead of Kazuhiho.”

“Don't be dumb, Zera. I'm not shameless enough to ask them to deliver us

some food. Though, that would help with morale, so I have to admit I'm tempted," Doula said as she wiped the crumbs off of Zera's mouth, showing her maternal side. It was strange seeing her take care of her fiancé while insulting him with a cold look on her face.

I thought about Zera's proposal of ordering ingredients. Arilai had some high-quality spices, tea, and grain. My wallet would greatly appreciate it if they could send us what we needed. But in order to do that, we had to shorten the path between the labyrinth's entrance and HQ somehow. In dungeon crawler games, one usually unlocked shortcuts after clearing a dungeon. I figured that was asking for too much and sighed.

I hadn't noticed at the time, but a strange key was dangling from Marie's waist as she rubbed her stomach with satisfaction. It glinted in the light, but no one noticed it as they enjoyed their meal. It would still be some time before the path opened.

And so, today's raid had come to a relatively quiet close.

§

The room was filled with a deafening silence. It was so dark that those gathered there couldn't even see their neighbor's face, but they didn't need to see each other to know their expressions were filled with despair. After all, the Lich had left after only saying, "Ah."

"Weren't they having a harder time on the previous floor...?"

"Hey, zip it! I was making an effort not to say it out loud!" The commander of the group twitched in response to the bandit and Kartina's voices. But when he looked upon the group's faces, he realized everyone else was saying the same thing and decided to keep his mouth shut. The man was usually cold and composed, but he was definitely shaken by the fact that these powerful monsters left on their own, one after another.

He straightened his collar absentmindedly, then quietly reassessed the situation. The defense system was far superior on the third floor, and the monsters there were on a completely different level. But for some reason, he felt as if the tides had shifted for the worse here.

He couldn't quite place his finger on the feeling of helplessness that was overflowing inside him. No matter how much he advanced, he couldn't make any progress. In fact, the pieces at his disposal disappeared as he went. He gritted his teeth and glared at the footage. He could see them merrily spending their time together.

No. It's not supposed to be like this.

He had anticipated various scenarios, but not the sight of the tasting party before him. It was difficult to even comprehend. Normally, he would be enjoying the front-row seat to a thrilling hellscape. He didn't want to hear their laughter echoing in the silent, dim room. It was terribly depressing somehow.

"I don't think they even noticed this time..."

"You fool! Our leader is brilliant! Of course he has another plan lined up!" He felt his head go numb. He was even getting cornered by his own subordinates.

Fortunately, he was quite resilient and capable of keeping his emotions contained. Otherwise, he may have clutched his own head and screamed. Or maybe he would have punched one of his men in the head. But as a leader, he had to give hope to his team. That was his duty.

"Of course. This is the third floor. There is always a way."

"Oooh!" Visible relief washed over the members of his team. With a glint of hope in sight, they were eager to know the next step. He flashed a reassuring smile, then spoke to his useless subordinates.

"I have an ace up my sleeve at all times. Yes, I still have my last resort."

"Wait, you're on your last one already?" He shot a glare at the speaker, and Kartina covered her mouth with her hands and averted her eyes.

It seemed that it was sometimes necessary to let out his emotions and swing his fists after all.

He rolled up his sleeves.

Chapter of Midsummer, Episode 10: To the Wave Pool

I slowly opened my eyes. There, I saw brand new sheets and even whiter, lustrous hair. I felt the silky texture between my fingers, and when I stroked it, a faint feminine smell wafted into the air.

Her quiet breath tickled against my collarbone. She looked so defenseless sleeping there in bed, and she clung to me with both arms and a peaceful expression.

Her pale neck, her captivatingly long eyelashes... I could feel her warmth through the thin fabric of her pajamas. Something came over me and I embraced her back, and my hands rested on her slender waist and back.

Still deep in her slumber, she made a cute sleepy noise all of a sudden. As I stared at her full lips, Marie slowly opened her eyes. I may have been waiting for this moment. I wanted to watch the moment her amethyst eyes opened as she awakened here in Japan.

There were some ways in which she differed from humans. Her eyes shimmered like precious stones, and her pristinely smooth skin was just asking to be touched. I wasn't sure if this was a common trait among elves, or if it was a part of Mariabelle's natural charm.

Just then, Marie placed her thigh onto my hip and clung onto me so our stomachs were touching. I knew she was still half asleep, but this was a bit much. Marie seemed unconcerned by my distress and shivered. She then let out an adorable yawn and gazed at me with her moist, purple eyes.

"Hee hee, the weekend has finally come. I wonder what fun adventure you have in store for me this time? If you can't think of anything, I'm making you do impersonations."

"Wh-Why impersonations? Anyway, I'll list out some ideas, so will you let me know if any of them sound interesting?"

Marie agreed and sat up, then mounted me for some reason. The gesture was harmless enough, but the warmth of her butt pressing against me made my heart beat faster.

Despite this, she seemed completely unconcerned, and she reached over to touch the black precious stone with the tip of her finger. The stone then immediately changed shape into a black cat, which landed upon the ground. It was kind of like the Arkdragon's familiar, or more like a strange stone that allowed her to visit Japan from the other world.

I watched the cat meow with a sidelong glance, and then a thought came to mind.

"I know. How about we go to a pool? It's summer, after all. We could go get swimsuits together and drive to the pool from there." I thought it was a good idea, but Marie shot me a dubious look for some reason.

That's weird... She doesn't seem interested at all.

"Don't be silly. We're not rich. There's no way commoners like us could go to a pool. There are very few people with such facilities, even in the other world. You should just call it a river or a lake instead of making yourself seem fancy, you know."

"Oh, I see. I think there's a difference in our sense of values. It depends on the region, but pools are much more accessible than rivers and lakes in this country. See? Look." With that, I picked up my smartphone and played a promotional video for a pool. Marie and even the cat climbed onto my stomach and stared.

The video showed children happily running around and going down a water slide with cheerful laughter in the background. It finished playing after a minute or so, and I set my phone aside. The look on Marie's face was completely different from how it had been a moment ago. Her amethyst eyes were sparkling with interest.

"What do you think? If you're interested..."

"Let's go!" Marie said excitedly with flushed cheeks, and the cat meowed in agreement. Thus, our weekend plans were set. I was relieved that I didn't have to do any impersonations. Besides, I wanted to buy our swimsuits before we

went on the beach trip, and I wanted to see how well Marie could swim. Going to the pool was the perfect opportunity for me.

I booped the cat on the nose with my fingertip, then spoke to the woman in the other world.

“If you’re interested, how about we go pick you up in the dream world once we finish shopping for swimsuits? There’s nothing like having a hot meal after going to the pool. Ramen is one of my personal favorites.” Wridra’s golden eyes glinted, and she meowed enthusiastically in response. I could tell by the drooling that my comment had stimulated Wridra’s appetite. It made me smile watching the cat and Marie holding hands and cheering gleefully.

“Okay, then it’s decided. We’re picking out swimsuits today, then heading over to the pool.”

“Yaaay!”

I chuckled and stood up while they were jumping on the bed, then opened the curtains. The sunlight came shining into the room, telling me that it was the perfect day to be out in the pool.

That was a relief, considering they would have probably hated me if it was raining outside after hyping them up so much.

§

It was bright in the department store in front of Kinshicho Station, and there were seasonal sales going on in all sorts of stores. The swimsuit corner was glamorous in my eyes... Rather, I wasn’t quite brave enough to step foot inside. I stood there struggling mentally, and a group of students in uniform passed by. They seemed to be on their way home from their summer break club activities.

“Hey, did you see her?”

“Yeah! So cute! Why was she holding a cat?”

They talked amongst each other as they walked away, wondering where Marie was from, and saying they should have taken pictures.

“Hm,” I said. I couldn’t just leave Marie alone in there when we had come to shop together. And so, I straightened my back and walked into the swimsuit

corner as naturally as I could manage. There, I saw her walking around by herself with a worried expression, but her face brightened as soon as she saw me.

“Oh, good. I was hoping you would come with me. Here, hold on to Wridra.”

“Sure thing. This is your first time picking clothes you wear in the water, huh?” I picked up Wridra, and she just calmly hung from my arms like usual. Marie was deep in thought for some time, then looked up as if she remembered something.

“In water...? Wait, there was that one time in the typhoon.”

“Oh, you mean the raincoat. You’re not wrong, but that was in the rain.” I definitely didn’t expect that, but maybe I should have worded it better. Like “clothes that are easy to swim in,” for example.

“I did see some girls wearing something like this around me. Most elves don’t like clothes that restrict movement.”

“Now that you mention it, a lot of them did wear revealing clothes. You usually wore robes, so I nearly forgot.” It seemed she didn’t like that comment. Seeing her puff out her cheeks unhappily, I felt a bit of panic. I thought maybe it was insensitive of me to mention other women, but it seemed that was wrong.

“It’s not fair. Why did I always have to wear gray robes when I’m an elf too?”

“Wait, *that’s* what you were talking about? I mean, I basically only had one outfit over there too. Plus, isn’t it kind of nice to not have to worry about getting your clothes dirty or ripped up?” She shot me a look, as if to say she wasn’t a slob like me. Then, she began complaining about robes as if to unleash her pent-up frustrations.

“Sure, it wasn’t mandatory to wear them, but I’m sure there were some rights and interests involved with the reason they were officially adopted. Don’t you think so too? Otherwise, why wouldn’t they pick a cuter design or give us other options?”

“Oh, um... Who knows. But Arilai is pretty far from the Sorcerer’s Guild, so you can probably wear whatever you want there.” Wridra meowed, maybe to express her agreement. The Arkdragon could create all sorts of things, so surely

she would have no problem making some clothes. Marie liked wearing cute outfits, and I could tell that robe wasn't the kind of design she liked.

"R-Right! Maybe I'll consider it if you say so!" I thought Marie had once said it was proper to wear the official outfit as a sorceress, but it seemed she was getting more flexible with her way of thinking.

She looked happy as her mouth curled into a smile, but then I remembered something and shook my head.

"Actually, now wouldn't be a good time. I mean, we're in the middle of a mission in the labyrinth, so it might not be a good idea to change your outfit so drastically..."

"Ah!" Marie staggered, then curled up on the ground. She had been hit with the harsh reality after seeing a glint of hope, so it took me a while to console her.

Now, it was time to resume our shopping.

We first did a lap around the shop to get an idea of the latest overall trend, then took a closer look at the items.

This also applied to picking clothes and shoes, but Marie was very cautious when it came to selecting a single piece of clothing, and she sometimes ended up buying nothing at all when she didn't find something she liked. I saw that Marie was staring at a price tag.

"What do you think? Did you find anything you like?"

"Take a look at this. This is such a pretty color. It's more vivid than what I usually wear... See? This sky blue swimsuit is beautiful. But do you think it's a bit too revealing?"

"Oh, that's a nice summery color. I feel like they'd all look good on you because you're so cute, Marie." Marie turned around to look at me. She made a prim face, as if to say I should compliment her more. Though, anyone would have agreed that Marie was quite pretty.

"If you're not sure what to get, you can try stuff on in that dressing room. You can pick out a few that catch your eye."

“Yes, I think I will. Help me pick something, Wridra.” The cat meowed and nodded, so I handed her off to Marie. Wridra’s fashion sense had been improving as of late, and it seemed she had won over Marie’s trust in that department. Maybe it would have been fine if I waited outside after all. As I considered this, Marie turned around.

“You’re in charge of judging the swimsuits. Don’t you dare run away like last time, okay?” She made a pinching gesture, and I had to surrender right away. I watched as the two made their picks, and then we walked toward the dressing rooms.

The curtains slid open, revealing Marie in an aqua-colored bikini. Her pale, smooth skin, adorable belly button, and breasts that were even more alluring than I’d imagined left me speechless for a moment.

“Wow, you look amazing. We’re starting this off strong, aren’t we?” The first thing that came out of my mouth was my honest feedback. The revealing outfit really accentuated her charm. It was almost hard to believe I’d spent so much time with someone who had such a vibrant, curvy body. Marie’s face turned into a brighter shade of red as time went on, and she closed the curtains without saying a word.

Wait, didn’t she want me to judge her outfit?

“Never mind! It’s too embarrassing showing so much skin! Urgh, why? I was completely fine when we were picking it out!”

“But it looked really great on you. You have long legs, so I’m sure most swimsuits do. You were the spitting image of a mystical elf.”

“Ahhh! No, this one’s not happening!” It seemed Marie was curled up in the dressing room, because I could see her butt near her feet, swaying slightly as if she was shaking her head side to side. Now *my* face was about to turn red.

I could hear her muttering about lewdness and shamelessness, and I could only smile awkwardly along with the cat. Well, I would just consider that a rare and precious experience. Though, I obviously wouldn’t be the only one looking at her out in public, so I wanted her to pick something she felt more comfortable in.

I waited patiently for some time, and she was finally ready to move on to the next outfit.

“Are you there, Kazuhiro-san? There’s no one else around, is there?” I told her the coast was clear and she opened the curtain hesitantly.

I was taken aback by the sight before me. Unlike the previous bikini, she was now wearing a tamer one-piece.

The purple swimsuit had a shorter hem so it wouldn’t get in the way of swimming, and she was revealing more thigh than usual. It seemed this was still within the acceptable range for her.

“H-How is it? Does it look strange?” she asked shyly while fidgeting with the purple strap on her shoulder. Her face was red as she looked up at me, and she was seemingly concerned about her exposed thighs and shoulders... I couldn’t help but think about how lucky I was to be the first one she was showing her swimsuits to.

Just then, I could see the sight of the beach behind her. It was just my imagination, but I could smell the salt in the air and picture the sun shining brightly overhead.

I met her eyes, and the words came naturally.

“It looks lovely on you. It really brings out your charm, like you’re a fairy come to life.”

“Thank...you. I’ll go with this one then. It wasn’t too expensive either.” Marie looked away, then went ahead and made the purchase.

She ended up avoiding me until she was done buying the swimsuit, but she held the shopping bag as if it was precious to her and wore a happy expression on her face. Though, I somehow felt like the black cat was glaring at me. I didn’t recall doing anything wrong, but I wondered if I had screwed up somewhere.

Marie began humming as we got back to the parking lot, and our car began running under the blue sky.

And so, it was time for us to visit the wave pool.

There were dense clouds within the blue sky above as we left the parking lot.

When I opened my eyes, everything was dark. I could see a little bit thanks to the moonlight, but I was afraid I would stub my toe on something if I didn't feel around with my hands. I could tell we were in the tent we had bought recently, but I wasn't used to it enough to tell where the entrance was.

"Well, this isn't good. If only Marie was here, she could summon a light." I scratched my head as I managed to get out of the tent somehow, then realized I wouldn't have any issues finding out which direction I was heading in. On the other side of the river, I could see a dull light in the forest.

"Oh, that's toward the direction of our house. Are they working this late at night?" I left my bag behind for now and began walking toward the light.

It wasn't often that I would walk in the darkness like this. There was about a half day of time difference between here and the dream world, and I was usually out and about during the morning to evening. That was why I didn't have any torches or other goods that would help me navigate through the darkness. So on days when I went to sleep during the day like today, I had to tread carefully to make sure I didn't trip over anything.

I was here to pick up Wridra on our way to the pool, and I figured she was at the light ahead.

One thing that bothered me was the fact that the cat seemed displeased in the car. I wondered if I had done something to irritate her as I hopped down from the log that was placed there as a bridge.

I could hear owls hooting as I slowly made my way along a footpath. I could smell the trees as I continued walking in the dewy, peaceful night, and the partially built garden came into view.

"The garden is really coming together in the past few days." The trees growing in little clusters looked like friends huddled up together. They still looked a bit lonely, but with the manager of life and death taking care of them, I was sure this place would be vibrant soon.

I absentmindedly approached the light source and saw the two girls sitting there on some metal chairs. There was a blueprint of a house laid out on a big

table with tools for boiling water and other purposes all around it. It seemed this was their base of operations for the construction. As for Wridra, she still wore the same sullen expression as the cat did.

“Well, well, look who is here. Behold, Shirley. That is the face of the man who did not even consider my swimsuit after making me go along with their shopping.” The semitransparent Shirley covered her mouth and tilted her head, as if to say, “Is that true?” Her innocent eyes pierced through me, and I felt my back grow cold with sweat.

No, no, this is a misunderstanding. Wridra can make her own swimsuit, and I don't even know her size.

Before the excuses could even leave my mouth, the Arkdragon crossed her legs on her chair and pointed her finger at me.

“Not to mention, you should have seen his face as he ogled Marie in her swimsuit. This is his slovenly expression from that moment.”

“Waaait, stop! Don't use your projection magic for that!” I had to admit, I panicked. I never imagined she would show me my own face from when I was appreciating how cute Marie was.

Seeing Shirley approach gingerly and stare seriously with her sky blue eyes was too much to handle. I was so embarrassed I could have dropped dead then and there. I curled up listlessly on the ground, and Wridra looked gleeful for some reason.

“Hm, now who was it who did not wake up my familiar so he could have secret affairs with the elf? I doubt it was only once or twice.”

“Ah?! Y-You knew?” I screwed up. I had only realized Wridra was baiting me when a malicious smile spread across her face.

“Hmm, hmm, well now. I do wonder what sorts of affairs you had at night. Even as an Arkdragon, I must respect your privacy. So, if you do not tell me what you do in detail, I just may accidentally interrupt you two. Do you not agree?”

Even Shirley approached me curiously...and I knew I had no choice but to share. But even though Shirley's face was red, her eyes were alight with

eagerness for some reason. I was grabbed by the shoulders and forced to sit up. Shirley was breathing heavily out of her nose despite her flushed expression, and I knew there was no escaping this nightmare.

“Now, cease your resistance and speak. What sorts of unspeakable things were you two doing?” The cruelty in Wridra’s voice as she whispered in my ear was really something else. Though, I had never seen her look so entertained before. Not to mention, Shirley’s face was way too close to mine. Were they really that interested in the private affairs between me and Marie?! I had no choice but to bring out my secret weapon. And so, I let out a “Hmph” and looked directly at Wridra.

“I see. So you’re not interested in ramen, Wridra? That’s a shame. I guess I’ll just have some with Marie and go home.”

“N-Now wait just one minute! Th-That was nothing but some harmless banter! I can simply create a swimsuit with my ability, so it is no issue at all!” I was finally set free. Nothing beat being knowledgeable about food after all. Shirley looked disappointed for some reason, but I wanted her to understand that I really couldn’t take much more.

Anyway, now that I had Wridra with me, we headed back to the tent together. Shirley followed us with light footsteps, then gestured something with her fingers, as if trying to tell us something.

“Hm? You want to hold on to my shoulders? That’s fine, of course, but can you make physical contact?” She was far more see-through than when we had walked together in the labyrinth, so I had assumed she wouldn’t be able to touch me. But Shirley smiled charmingly and held on to my shoulders.

I was a bit surprised when I felt her warmth through her fingers, and she floated into the air. As her dress flowed around her like she was drifting underwater, it hit me. During the time she had haunted me in Japan, she had gained the ability to hold on to my soul itself. I had already gotten used to being haunted, so I didn’t mind.

“Would you like to come with us, Shirley? We’re going to go visit a place called a pool where you can swim in the water.” She shook her head. According to Wridra, someone needed to take care of the forest, so Shirley had been using

her time away from the labyrinth to handle the task.

The reason she was semitransparent now was probably because she was allocating most of her powers to the forest. Wridra had explained this to me as I was laying out the bedding in the tent.

“Then maybe you can take a day off from the labyrinth whenever you want to visit Japan. We’ll be going to Izu soon. Would you like to join us?” Shirley tucked me in up to the shoulder and smiled gently. It seemed she was interested. She then brought out a picture book as if she was going to read it to me.

“Hm? Are those monsters from the third floor? That’s cute; the illustrations look like they were drawn with colored pencils.”

“Hah, hah, that is no ordinary picture book,” Wridra said as she moved the blanket aside and slid in next to me. She pulled on my arm to use as a pillow, and her long, black hair nestled up against me.

“Hm, I suppose I will see how Marie feels for once and embrace you from the front.”

“I don’t mind, of course, but don’t hold me too hard. I won’t be able to sleep.” Wridra shot me a glare, then inched closer with her shoulders still bare.

It seemed she had taken her clothes off as usual, and I felt her put her thigh over me under the blankets. More importantly, I was wondering what she meant when she said it was no ordinary picture book. I stared at the book again and saw that a few pages were already filled out. The white lizard thing from before took up a whole page, while the other illustrations were smaller.

“You will understand soon enough. As the manager of life and death, Shirley’s characteristics are completely different from that of a normal adventurer.” With that, Wridra let out a big yawn. It was warm under the blankets as our bodies prepared to fall asleep. The temperature grew even warmer as I felt her smooth back while she pressed up against me.

“Nnh, your warmth makes me quite drowsy. It is not easy to part with such comfort.” She was already half asleep as she mumbled some noises and nestled her nose into my neck. The dragon then fell into a deep slumber. Sleepiness came over me as her body relaxed completely, and I felt the comfort of her

bare, soft body against mine. Shirley had helped put me to sleep, so I had to say goodbye before my consciousness gave out.

“Good night, Shirley. You can haunt me anytime if you ever want to come to Japan. Marie was actually saying it would be a nice way to go on a diet.” Framed by the moonlight, Shirley smiled warmly. I was relieved to see that there was no trace of the fear of solitude she once had in her expression. She now seemed like a mother watching over her child, and there was a comforting scent about her that reminded me of the sun.

I loved seeing such an expression, so free of worry, above all else.

I remembered the inexplicable worry I sensed in my mother’s expression that I had seen so long ago. It wasn’t that she had expressed it outright; in fact, I wasn’t even in her field of view. I remembered thinking I already didn’t exist in her mind and crying all the way into the morning.

Maybe that was why I felt such comfort seeing that look on Shirley’s face.

My consciousness went fuzzy as she gently stroked my hair.

The last thing I remembered was the sound of a hooting owl.

§

At first, I heard someone screeching loudly. My eyes opened in a daze, my consciousness slowly returning to me.

I could see the interior of the car with curtains all around and the bright sunlight. I was finally able to process why Marie was screaming. A naked, black-haired beauty had her arms wrapped around me in the middle of the day.

“Whoa!” I shouted, but the black-haired beauty was sleeping comfortably with her vivid lips pressed against my clavicle. She must have been pretty deep in her slumber, because her arms locked around me again even after I managed to get up.

“Kyaaa! Wridra! Your behind is completely bare! The curtains may be drawn, but what if someone sees you?!”

“Hnn... I suppose just five more minutes will suffice... I shall allow it...” Even though she was still half asleep, I was no match for a dragon’s ridiculous

strength. I immediately surrendered as she squeezed me around my neck. I couldn't open my eyes or escape her grasp by myself.

“Marie, please!”

“Oh, what have I told you about your habit of sleeping naked? It's shameless! Indecent! Prepare yourself, Wridra!”

A loud *thwap!* sounded in the car as if someone had gotten slapped, hard.

The Arkdragon twitched, but I couldn't see what was happening with something soft covering my face.



“Now, Ms. Sleepy Arkdragon, do you want another slap on your behind?!”

“Fine, fine! I am waking up! Goodness, this young elf is out of control. I cannot believe you slapped the bottom of a dragon!” Wridra yawned and lifted her body off of me. I was finally able to breathe again. I left my eyes closed, of course. Though, Marie’s hands quickly covered them regardless.

“Hm. So we are in the parking lot of the pool, are we? Then I shall change into the so-called swimsuit. I suppose I will need to go through the trouble of hiding my horns and tail as well,” Wridra said, which meant I really couldn’t open my eyes now. I had realized she was covering up her naked body with a swimsuit while still mounted on top of me.

I wished Wridra would learn some shame for once. But since she was a dragon, being out naked didn’t bother her one bit.

“Oh, are you going to match my swimsuit? It would be cute to have the same design with different colors.”

“Hmm, I did give it a try, but those frilly skirts do not match my taste. I prefer this bikini instead.”

“Yes, I think a more mature design would suit you better than a cute one. Though, that’s a bit too simple, so how about adding a bit more flair to it?” It looked like Marie was starting to enjoy this too. I wondered if she realized I was a man, despite my sleepy-looking face...

“Hm, then I shall add some intricate designs to the hem of the swimsuit. It may look good if I add a collar as well. What do you think?”

“Oh, oh, that would be great! Can you make me one in a different color later?” Why were they getting so hyped up about this? And I wished they would stop having a fashion show on top of me. But I kept my complaints to myself and waited for time to pass with my eyes still closed.

It was hectic in the car for some time later, but we finally decided to head out to the pool.

I opened the door and stepped outside to see a glass building that looked a lot like a botanical garden and heard cheerful laughter in the distance.

This really took me back. I tried to remember the last time I had worn swim trunks as I stared at my brand-new pair.

I was a bit self-conscious about my pale skin, so I had chosen one that went down to my knees.

We met outside of the changing rooms. It was pretty loud outside with noise reverberating off of the glass surrounding us. The humidity and sun coming down through the glass was making me sweat. The effort I put into blowing up the dolphin-shaped flotation device only made me sweat harder. We had just purchased this too, and it was an essential item in helping Marie enjoy the process of learning to swim.

I looked around as I continued to blow up the floatie.

The pool was under the management of the ward, and most of the visitors were children and their parents. This was the first time my guests from the fantasy world had come to a pool, so I thought this sort of small-scale facility would be better. I doubted anyone here would try to hit on them either.

Such were my thoughts as the two ladies stepped out of the changing room.

But boy, did those two stand out. Even though Marie's one-piece wasn't quite so revealing, she was already exceptionally cute to begin with. Her thighs on full display were dazzling, and those around her fell silent, as if they had just witnessed a resplendent flower blooming.

Her long, white hair was bundled up to the side, and she seemed cautious about her long ears getting exposed.

As for Wridra, she was wearing a simple black bikini, but there was nothing simple about her body. The thin cloth of her swimsuit was struggling to hold in her bewitchingly curvy figure.

She was tying her hair back with a rubber band in her mouth, her almond-shaped eyes staring right at me. The girls waved as they approached me.

"Ah, ah, it got bigger! What is this? So cute!"

"Oh, I suppose you wouldn't know what a dolphin is if you've never seen the sea. Then, this is a present for a certain adorable elf that looks great in her

swimsuit.” With that, I sealed the flotation device before tossing the dolphin toward Marie.

“Eep!” At first, Marie was surprised by the size of the object thrown at her, but then she grabbed it with both hands, and her eyes widened at how light it was. The sleeve of the outer layer of her swimsuit fell away with the motion, revealing the purple one underneath, and a strange new feeling rose within me.

Heart pounding, I repeated to myself that it was just a swimsuit, but then Wridra moved her face up to mine. She looked like she was waiting for something, though I wasn’t sure what.

“Where is *my* float?”

“Huh? There’s only one. I thought you wouldn’t need one, since you’re so tall.”

She sank her fist into my side with a smile on her face. It was actually strong enough to make me drop to one knee. Marie was playing with the dolphin, unconcerned, and I thought to myself that she had gotten completely used to Wridra by now. But man, her punch felt like her fist went right through my kidney. It wasn’t that she had put much force into it, but rather that her aim was way too accurate. Maybe she was starting to gain some strange knowledge during her time in Japan.

“Very well, I suppose we will need to take turns using it.”

“What? But I don’t want to. This is my dolphin. Hey, wait, stooop!” I heard the plastic getting stretched, and...the poor dolphin’s face was warped, making it look upset.

Hang in there, dolphin...

I couldn’t move with my hand over my stomach, but I wished the dolphin would live a longer life than me.

In any case, we eventually started heading toward the pool.

When we passed through the door, the bright sun awaited us. But there was a nice breeze, which did help with the humidity. The heated pools inside inns were accessible year-round, but considering it was summer, I figured it would

have been more fun to be out under the sun.

“Sooo hot! Mm, so this is summer in Japan, huh?” Marie said as she stretched her limbs out wide.

I was reminded of my student days. I distinctly remembered the ticklish feeling as I walked along the grainy texture of the ground. It had been some time since I experienced the salty smell in the air and the water being as hot as bath water when I stepped foot inside.

The sound of cicadas in the distance and dense clouds in the blue sky were the very picture of summer vacation. But seeing the ladies from the fantasy world skip around happily, I could tell that they were having even more fun than I was.

Wridra held the float over one shoulder with Marie clinging on to her, and cheerfully they talked about the ground tickling their feet and how there were so many people around. The sight of the blue pool with water flooding through it was likely a sight that couldn't have been found in their world. They looked at me with eyes full of curiosity and wonder.

“Say, where do we get in the pool?”

“You can go in from wherever you want. But you should get used to the water first.” Marie tugged on my hand to hurry me along, seemingly unable to wait to use the dolphin float. I could understand she was getting restless from the excitingly pretty aqua-colored plastic.

“Okay, first try dipping your feet in the water like this.” I approached the pool and put my feet in the water to demonstrate. I beckoned the girls over, and they also got in the water up to their knees.

“Nnh, it's colder than I thought! And the water is so clear. Look, Wridra, it goes all the way around.”

“I see. I do wonder how it continues circulating. It almost looks like an optical illusion.” A girl with a flotation ring just happened to drift by in front of us, and she and Marie waved at each other. It was a wholesome sight, but I noticed the lifeguard was staring at Marie and Wridra a bit too intensely... I decided not to worry about it too much.

“Now, pour some water on yourself to get used to it some more.”

“Aaah, so cold!” We splashed water on ourselves, and we were ready to go.

I went inside the pool first and reached out to Marie with both hands, and she squeezed them back. She furrowed her eyes a bit, then jumped in at once.

She must have slipped, because her head sank all the way in the water. She tugged on my hands in a panic. Marie’s face then emerged from the water, her hair stuck to her forehead.

“Pwah! That surprised me. Wridra, can you pass me the dolphin?”

“Hah, hah, hold on tight.” Wridra tossed the dolphin at Marie, and she hurriedly reached out her hands. She caught the air-filled float, then flashed a happy smile.

“Let me show you how to use the float before we start swimming. Spread your arms out a bit.”

“Like this?” I grabbed her under both armpits and lifted her up. Her body was very light under the water, and she ended up mounting the dolphin. She grabbed the dorsal fin without thinking and wrapped her legs around the tail fin, and her eyes lit up.

“Wow, I did it! Look at me, I’m floating!” Marie looked at me with a happy, innocent expression, but with her swimsuit-clad butt right in front of me...this angle was a bit troubling. The wet fabric stuck right to her skin, so I could see the lines of her rear quite clearly.

I’d thought the thin one-piece was comparatively tame in design, but the vivid colors stood out once wet, and I felt myself go a bit light-headed. This might have been even more erotic than a normal bikini.

“I shall ride it too!” Wridra shouted.

“Wait, no, no, no! Don’t shake it now, or you’ll... Gyah!” The dolphin flipped over, and I quickly went over to help them. I grabbed Marie’s wrist as she struggled under the water, then pulled her close. Her white hair emerged from the water, and she wrapped her arms around my neck.

“Wridra! Oh, thank you, Kazuhiro-san,” she said, but I was having trouble

figuring out how to react. Her bare, wet skin was pressed against me, and I was supporting her by her slender waist. I could feel her soft breasts pressing right up against me.

The water undulated as it made little waves. It splashed against her clavicles, and her cleavage wet with water droplets was too dazzling to look at. Completely oblivious to my mental state, Marie laid her chin on my shoulder.

“Ahh, so warm. Oh, let’s go chase after Wridra. I’d like to get her back by flipping her over from behind.”

“Yeah, let’s do that. We’ll swim slowly and chase her down.” Marie nodded and finally released me, and I felt a strange mixture of relief and disappointment. And so, I held on to her hands and began our swimming lesson.

We could hear children laughing around us. It looked like just another peaceful day, but no one seemed to notice an elf and a dragon were among them.

The battle for the dolphin continued, and Marie’s sabotage grew more complex as she added rocking and splashing tactics. I was happy seeing the two laughing together. They had grown to laugh more with each passing day. I was sure the same went for Shirley, who was now managing the forest on the second floor. Come to think of it, it was strange to think we were all playing together like this when they had each killed me before.

As I considered this thought, Marie squeezed my hand from beside me.

“Wridra is so mean. She secretly used magic to make a water current and made me fall. Can you believe her? Let’s team up and get the dolphin back!”

“Oh, but you might rip a hole in it if you get too rough,” I said, but Wridra was taunting Marie by slapping her big butt from afar. That was her way of saying she wanted more attention. We laughed, and then our war council for retrieving the dolphin began.

“Okay, if we’re doing this, we’re going all out. We’ll need to be quiet and precise if we’re going to get the dolphin back without the lifeguard getting mad at us,” I said.

“That’s the spirit. Okay, we won’t be able to use Mind Link Chat here in Japan. That means we’ll need to lay out the entire plan beforehand.”

We went back and forth to come up with a plan, but we ended up with the simple plan of “take the dolphin back by force.” Whatever happened to the intellect and coordination we had exhibited in the labyrinth? I picked Marie up by her underarms, then dropped her on top of the dolphin where Wridra was lying down. I then tickled Wridra’s sides, and she burst out into laughter.

“Haaa ha ha! This is what you came up with after all that planning? Hng... Aha ha ha!”

“Now, surrender and release the dolphin! Or you’ll be spending the rest of your day laughing!” That was quite an unusual threat. But the tactic seemed to be working, because Wridra was losing her balance while cackling joyously. However, the enemy was not to be underestimated. Just before falling off, she grabbed on to Marie, dragging her into the water with her.

I was left alone with the dolphin, and when I saw them coming up to breathe in the distance, an urge came over me. I decided to take advantage of the situation.

“Hey! Stop right there, Kazuhiro-san! What do you think you’re doing?!”

“Ha ha ha, you lost because you didn’t anticipate my betrayal. And... Hup.”

Oh, this is nice. I could just float here serenely, and the sun felt nice against my back. So this was why they wanted the dolphin so much.

I was leisurely enjoying the float, but my turn ended as soon as it had come. Wridra lifted Marie from under her arms and had her mount the float from above, using the same tactic we had used earlier. I quickly slid down the side to flee into the pool before I could get knocked off.

“Hey, no fair! Come back here so I can tickle you!” Marie sure was full of energy. She laughed without inhibition, and her swimming was improving naturally over time. I slowed down on purpose to let her catch up, and she clung on to my back and said, “Gotcha!”

“How are you enjoying the pool, Marie?”

“Hee hee, it’s so much fun!” She pressed her cheek against mine and giggled happily.

Her reaction warmed my heart. I was a bit worried at first because pools in Japan tended to get pretty crowded. After all, Marie really didn’t like crowds. I was relieved to see she was letting loose and having fun as usual once we got into the swing of things.

“Hmm, you’re quite comfortable to ride. You’re the perfect replacement for the dolphin.”

“Huh? Am I supposed to swim for you? What happened to swimming practice?”

“We can do that later. Now, let’s go catch up to Wridra.” Marie pressed up against my back in earnest and squeezed me between her thighs, and I felt like I had become the dolphin. I didn’t feel much of her weight in the water, but I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not.

As I swam along using breaststrokes, Marie spoke cheerfully next to my ear.

“Ah, this is nice and easy. You know how Shirley holds on to your shoulder? I feel like I kind of understand why now.”

“Huh, is that why? Though, she did seem like she was taking it easy on my shoulder. Just so you know, you’re making the same face as she was right now.”

“Oh, maybe I should order this cheeky little dolphin to swim faster.” Come to think of it, Marie seemed to be making a habit of clinging on to my back. Still, I wanted her to enjoy this day to the fullest.

The battle for the dolphin came to a close, but unfortunately, Wridra emerged the victor. We let ourselves drift in the water, enjoying the summer day off and tanning in the sun.

It was nice having some childlike fun like this every once in a while. As someone who tended to stay cooped up indoors, I had no interest in going to the pool, but I found that it was actually quite enjoyable.

After spending plenty of time in the wave pool, we decided to find something else to do. We walked up the stairs barefoot toward the main attractions of this

facility.

The sound of children cheering could be heard from above, and it was the very picture of a lively summer vacation. There was a blue spiral waterslide leading to the pool below.

It was about fifty meters in length and wasn't too crazy in terms of size or height. But as we got closer to the top, Marie began slowing her stride. She clung on to my arm with both hands, knees weak as she looked up at me with her amethyst eyes.

"Wait, wait, we're too high up. How can you two be so calm? Unbelievable."

Wridra and I blinked at each other. She was an Arkdragon who flew thousands of meters up in the sky, and I teleported around without any regard for height or distance. Marie seemed to understand this from the looks on our faces, and a cold sweat trailed down her face as her knees trembled.

"Yes, I see. That was my fault for asking such illogical people." To me, it was more strange that someone like Marie, who had accomplished so much in the ancient labyrinth, was afraid of this level of height.

I did kind of understand her sentiment though. Not only could we see the whole pool from up here, but the entire parking lot was visible. But since there were many visitors with their kids here, the proper safety precautions were in place. I looked around my surroundings, then heard that familiar, displeased voice again.

"Yes, I suppose I should at least try to have a positive mindset. This is very important, but let's decide the order in which we go down the slide. Of course, I refuse to go first or last."

"Hah, hah, in the spirit of fairness, we should settle this with rock paper scissors. Now... Rock, paper..."

"No! Wridra first, and Kazuhiro-san last! Please, please, let's go in that order, okay?! I'm not good at rock paper scissors, so I don't wanna play!"

Yup, Marie really was bad at rock paper scissors, mainly because she usually went with paper first. She started tearing up and shook her head no, and Wridra and I couldn't help but laugh. The way she stamped her bare feet and

whined was so cute that it made us smile.

“Next in line, please sit here,” the staff said.

“Hm, it is my turn. I shall go then.” Wridra was full of curiosity as she approached her very first waterslide, but something strange happened. The female staff member directing us was staring at Wridra, her cheeks turning pink and a glimmer in her eyes.

Wridra was indeed beautiful. Marie and I could both say this definitively. Her lustrous, long, black hair, obsidian eyes framed by long lashes, and voluptuous proportions captivated even her own gender. The prerequisite was that Wridra had to stay quiet and keep her horns and tail hidden, but someone who met her for the first time wouldn't notice her faults.

The staff member only flapped her mouth wordlessly, and it was plain to see that she was enchanted by Wridra's appearance. The Arkdragon said, “I thank you,” from up close, and the staff member clutched at her own heart.

Because of Wridra's height and pretty facial features, she attracted both men and women alike. I figured it had something to do with the Arkdragon blood within her, and it was part the reason why she tended to lay low inside the labyrinth. But she was able to let loose here in Japan, and her genuine smile was brimming with her personal charm. It was no wonder the staff member was getting flustered.

“Beauti— *Ahem*, I mean, miss, please put your arms over your chest like... Ahh, yes, exactly like that, wonderful. Now, please extend your legs and... Oh, ohh, you're flawless!”

“Hm? The customer service here is quite courteous, as one would expect in Japan. Well, I will await you two at the bottom.”

And so, Wridra led the vanguard and went down the slide under the guidance of the overly courteous staff member. The blue slide twisted in a spiral and accelerated as it led into a straight line. Once it gained plenty of speed, Wridra slid on the water's surface and dove into the pool at the bottom with a splash.

It sent waves through the pool in a circle around her, and then the black-haired beauty waved for us to follow suit.

“Okay, now please lower your hips.” Marie twitched as the staff member called out her instructions. There were kids waiting behind us, so there was no turning back now. Boy, she *really* looked like she didn’t want to go down. Marie put up her last bit of resistance by squeezing my hand as she lowered herself into position.

“Eek! It’s cold! Wh-Why is the water flowing? It’s cold and scary!”

“It lets you gain more speed that way. You might get hurt if you move around, so make sure to stay still.”

Oh, that was the wrong thing to say. The moment I said she might get hurt, Marie’s face turned pale. She clung onto my arm with both hands as soon as she started sliding down and didn’t let go. I was dragged into the blue tube with her, taking me along for the most terrifying waterslide ride of my life. My vision was immediately filled with blue, and Marie wrapped her arms around my neck...

Okay, this is really scary!

“Hhhyaaaaaa!”

“Calm down, calm down! Don’t put me in a headlock, please!” It even knocked the sleepy expression right out of my face. With the combined weight of two people, we swayed wildly within the tube with each curve, Marie screaming in fear the entire time. We cleared the final curve and slid down the straight line, and Marie’s screams grew more frantic as we picked up speed.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!” I pondered why I was locked in a wrestling move for the whole duration. We popped out of the slide, and I belly flopped onto the water with a loud *thwap!*

I was under the impression that we had come to play at the pool, but somehow I ended up eating an unorthodox DDT from a certain elf. I wasn’t sure how I felt as I sank deeper into the water.

“Whew, that was surprisingly nice. Oh, why did you slide down with me, Kazuhiro-san? Were you worried about me or something?”

“I wonder why... Aha... Maybe you should ask Wridra rolling on the ground laughing over there.” Marie looked rather perplexed, then clung on to my

shoulders. It seemed she wanted me to carry her to the poolside. I was impressed to find that Marie had figured out her own way to spend her time at the pool in leisure.

We ended up going down the waterslide one more time, and Wridra suffered the same as I did.

It was hard for anyone to notice fatigue when they were having fun. Wridra was full of energy as always, but Ms. Elf, not so much. Marie was more of the intellectual type, and her physical prowess was on par with that of a child.

Her slender fingers gripped the handrail, and I supported her hips from behind as she climbed out of the pool. She seemed like she was out of energy and looked a bit unsteady. Water splashed down from her body as she turned around to thank me.

“The sun’s starting to set. I think it’s about time we headed home,” I said.

“Oh, right... But I think we can stay for a bit longer. There are still plenty of people here. I’m starting to get used to swimming too, so I want to practice a bit more.”

I also got out of the pool. Wridra approached from behind, water dripping from her body onto the tile.

“Marie, in this world, you must agree to whatever Kazuhiro decides. He may be overprotective at times, but he looks out for your well-being,” Wridra said, leaning.

“Right.” Marie pouted. It seemed she was sad about the abrupt end to our fun.

I was glad that Marie was interested in pools, and I did want to let her spend some more time here. Still, Marie was my lover and had only been here for less than half a year. I wanted her to take her time getting accustomed to this environment, so I didn’t mind being overprotective for a little bit.

“Then how about we all go get some tasty ramen together? Marie, do you want to ride my back to the changing rooms?”

“Yes.” I crouched down, and Marie put her weight on my back.

I wasn't sure if she was rubbing her nose against my neck because she wanted to snuggle or because she was sad. Her body was a bit chilly to the touch and smelled of chlorine. As I supported her by her still-wet butt, she felt as light as a feather.

"Well, this was like a little warm-up before the Izu trip. The real fun is yet to come, so I hope you look forward to it. I'm surprised that you learned how to swim properly so quickly."

"Of course. I used to swim at the elf village sometimes too. I picked it up in no time since I was having so much fun here. Ah, I can't wait to go to Izu. I want you to flip the pages of the calendar until the day of the trip, okay?" Well, that was an awfully cute request. I wanted her to be more up-front about what she wanted like this in the future too. It made me happy to see.

The schedule for next week included the holidays. With the raid on the ancient labyrinth and work on the house and farm coming up, time would surely fly by.

Marie was cheerful again before I knew it, and her feet swayed back and forth as I carried her on my back.

§

"Welcome!" I opened the poorly fitted sliding door, and a distinct smell came wafting out of the room. I could sense the smell of various oils and the heat of boiling noodles as we entered.

The aging owner who had welcomed us boisterously wasn't too surprised at my two far-from-Japanese-looking companions, and he guided us toward the counter. Maybe there had been more foreign tourists around here as of late.

"Hm. Quite the snug little establishment it is here. Something does smell good, however," Wridra said.

"Oh wow, my stomach growled as soon as I stepped inside. Goodness, it's like I've turned into a glutton all of a sudden." Marie had been a pretty big fan of eating even before she visited Japan, but I kept that to myself. Wridra's and Marie's hair was still damp as we all took a seat at the counter. There weren't many customers around, since some time had already passed since lunchtime.

Beside us, there was an old person reading a newspaper and a family that seemed to be on the way home from the pool. The radio playing in the background and old yet clean interior was the very image of a long-running ramen shop.

I then turned my attention to the two girls, who were staring at the menu with their brows furrowed. They always made that face whenever we visited an eatery like this. It was because they wanted to avoid ordering something that didn't fit their palate or ending up getting envious of other people's dishes. I watched as they deliberated for some time longer, then gave a suggestion.

"How about we each order something different and share?"

"Agreed!"

"Me too!"

They both agreed with a comically determined look on their faces. *Strange, I don't remember them replying so decisively when we were in the ancient labyrinth.*

And so, we decided to order the shoyu chashu, miso butter, and tonkotsu ramen, each in a large size. It would've been one thing if it was just me and Marie, but I had to consider ordering bigger portions with Wridra here.

I noticed a lot of ramen shops offered a variety of different ramen these days. As I considered this, the friendly-looking owner peeked out from the kitchen.

"Oh, is this your first time having ramen?"

"For these two, yes. They just came to Japan recently," I replied. Marie nodded, and the graying owner smiled.

"Is that right? Haneda is close to here, so it's been attracting a lot of foreign visitors. I never really thought of it as a cosmopolitan city, but I guess they do come by." The owner spoke in a frank manner, as if it didn't concern him much. Though, this technically wasn't an international cultural exchange, since they had come from another world. It wasn't as if he would understand that if I told him, so I kept that part to myself.

"So are you folks on a sightseeing tour? Though, it looks like you just got back

from the pool, and you don't look like a tour guide."

"Actually, we're dating," Marie said and hugged my arm. The owner's eyes went wide at her eloquent Japanese and cute gesture.

"Huh, is that so? You sure found yourself a looker despite your sleepy-looking face, huh? Here's your shoyu chashu. And here are some extra plates." The ramen bowl and extra plates were placed on the counter. The ladies had a glimmer in their eyes, but I had to transfer some of the ramen to the extra plates. A thought came to me just then, but I didn't realize I would be screwing myself over until later.

"Actually, it might feel like it's tastier if you eat directly from the bowl. Give it a try, Marie."

"Why, thank you. Sorry, Wridra, if you could wait just a bit longer..."

Wridra gulped, drool hanging down from her lips. But she ended up taking the mature approach and gestured for Marie to go ahead.

Marie split her wooden chopsticks with practiced hands. Beyond the wavering steam was the soy-sauce-based soup with oil floating on its surface. Soft fat could be seen on the lustrous piece of pork, and the green spinach stirred one's appetite even further.

I gestured to show her how to eat, and she gingerly picked up some noodles with her chopsticks. She then scooped her hair out of the way with one hand and began eating up the noodles.

The noodles disappeared into her mouth with a slurping sound, and their crimped shape allowed them to carry plenty of soup in the process. Marie made a satisfied groan and her eyes widened as she tasted the relieving flavor of soy sauce, umami-filled broth, and the chewy texture of the noodles.

"Mmm!" She exhaled a steamy breath and continued to chew some more.

It was the perfect meal to warm up from the chill. When animals sensed that they were lacking something, their brains would send a signal that food is delicious, incentivizing themselves to eat more. That was why food tasted extra good after losing body heat. The first taste of ramen packed quite a punch. As Marie slurped up the noodles, it seemed to me like that sort of primal instinct

was urging her to eat.

“S-Say, is it not about time for my turn? I understand, you must be upset at me for taking the dolphin. I truly apologize. It was immature of me.” Wridra began apologizing restlessly, but Marie was completely focused on the ramen. She swatted at Wridra’s hand, then scooped up some soup with her spoon and took a sip.

“Oh, I see you’re enjoying the food. Here’s the miso butter for you, missy with the black hair,” the owner said.

“Ahh, at long last! Hey, do not forget that we will exchange our bowls later.”

“Nngf (Okay)!”

Miso butter ramen was also delicious, whether it was eaten after visiting the pool or not. The scent of butter rising from the bowl was quite appetizing. Given the heaps of corn, bean sprouts, and soft chashu pork mixed with the butter, I knew before tasting it that it would taste amazing.

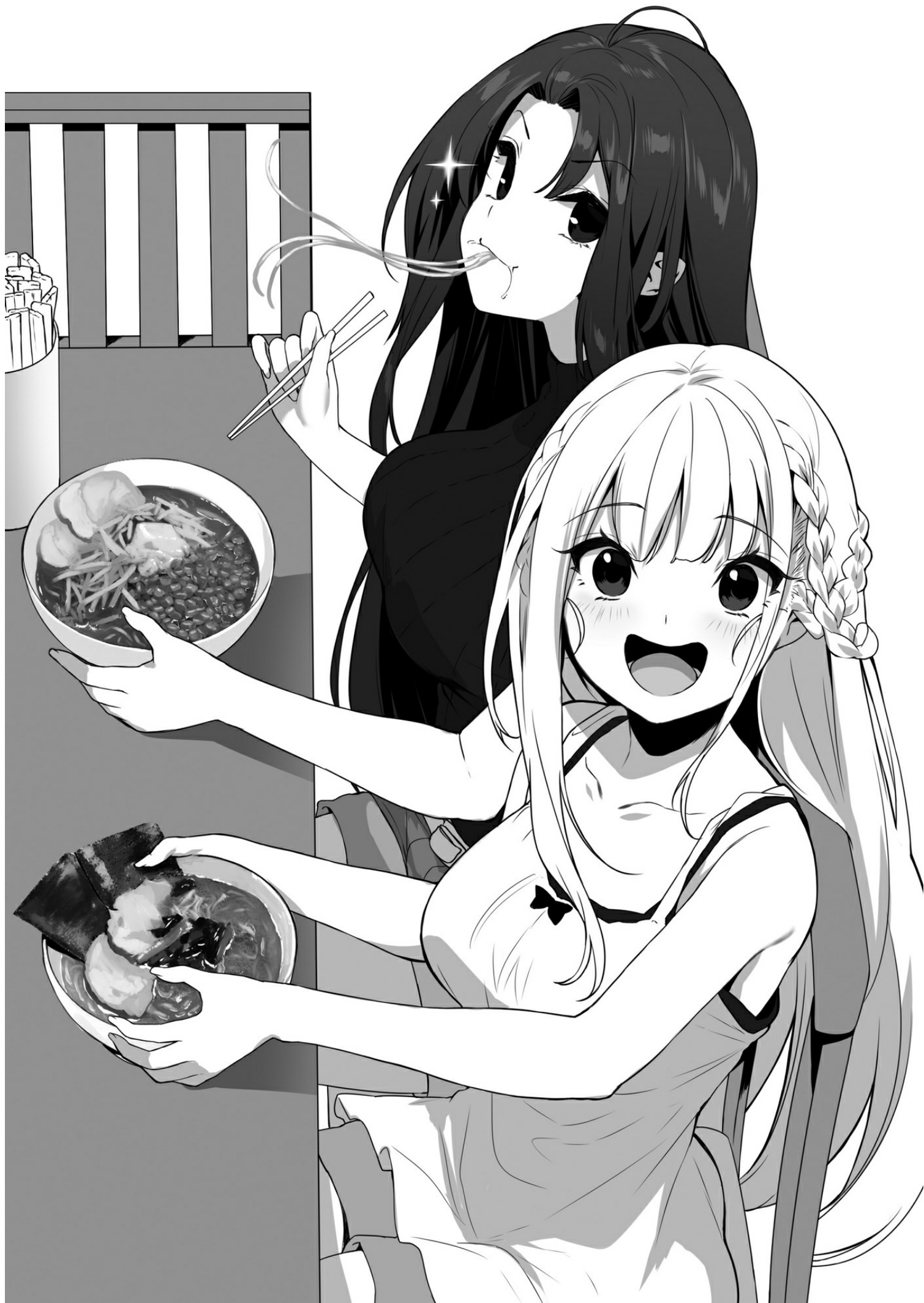
It was somewhat strange seeing the black-haired beauty slurp up noodles without hesitation. Her almond-shaped eyes opened wide. We just so happened to meet eyes then, and her expression wordlessly said, “The butter is delicious!”

The butter made the broth even richer as it melted over time so one wouldn’t grow tired of the taste. It made me appreciate how well designed the dish was.

Marie and Wridra’s desire for good food then synchronized in that moment, and they exchanged their bowls with one another.

“Mmf! This is amazing! I’ve never tasted anything like it!” Marie exclaimed.

“Delicious! I did not think noodles could have such a depth of flavor. The rich taste of the chashu truly elevates the entire dish!” The expressions on their faces were that of pure bliss, but the owner looked even happier. Anyone would be pleased to be complimented by such cute ladies, after all. In fact, the owner was all smiles, and he looked like he was glad he had decided to run a ramen shop.



“And here’s the tonkotsu. Our tonkotsu has a mild scent to it, and our foreign guests really love it. One taste, and you ladies are gonna be hooked.”

“Oh, my ramen is finally...” Marie and Wridra’s hands gripped the ramen bowl, and my face twitched.

I have a bad feeling about this. According to the owner, foreigners loved this tonkotsu ramen... I asked myself whether they would leave any for me, and alarm bells went off in my head.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I couldn’t help myself...” Marie said.

“I-It’s okay. Why don’t we each try a taste?” The tonkotsu ramen had finally come. I would soon find out that the owner wasn’t lying or exaggerating.

The white soup was made by boiling pork bones until the broth turned milky. It tasted mild, but there was a depth to its flavor that reared its head as it went down one’s throat. The girls were surprised by its unexpectedly gentle flavor and creamy texture.

“Ohh, I can’t! I can’t help but smile!” Marie exclaimed.

“Hmm! I do not grow tired of this flavor no matter how much I eat... I did not expect to discover such a treasure here!” It seemed Wridra had already forgotten I only offered them “a taste.” It was unusual for me to feel the urge to pinch Wridra, but I couldn’t reach her with Marie sitting between us.

Then, it hit me. Wridra was staring at me with a mean-spirited grin on her face.

Had she planned this all along? Could it be that I had already lost when we picked our seats?

I couldn’t turn down Marie’s request, and I couldn’t reach the bowl once it was passed over to Wridra. Had she really employed such high-level tactics into our seating?

My suspicions continued to mount higher, but I had a plan. I smiled, then enthusiastically asked the owner, “Oh, then can we get some extra noodles?”

“Sorry, we don’t offer that here.”

Ah. Left with no other option, I decided to add an order of shio ramen. Of course, there was a gleam in the Arkdragon's eyes as she stared at my bowl like a tiger after its prey, so I couldn't let my guard down.

The silent battle went on for a while longer, and it only ended when Marie declared that she was full.

We slowly rode down the road in the setting sun.

Unsurprisingly, it was quiet in the car. We had some ramen after playing at the pool, so all that was left to do was to take a nice nap. That was the proper way to spend one's free time, and the reason you needed a car when going to the pool. At least, that was the logic I lived by.

I could hear the other two sleeping in the back, and they looked like sisters when I glanced in the back mirror. This was like my very own reward.

The entrance fee for the ward was negligible, but it was an absolute blast thanks to those two. Their joy and excitement was truly infectious. Just walking around with them hand in hand filled me with happiness.

All we had done was go to an affordable pool and have some ramen, but my mouth curled into a smile on the drive home.

Good night, you two. Don't forget to take a bath when you wake up.

Chapter of Midsummer, Episode 11: The Correct Way to Spend a Day Off

A glass of iced tea was placed in front of me, and I said, “Thanks.”

Marie watched my listless face with a tray held against her chest, then sat down in the seat across from me.

The blue sky could be seen through the window on this weekend morning, and it looked like clouds would appear once the temperature rose. Marie was wearing an outfit appropriate for the summer: a camisole that hung off of her shoulders with lace and shorts that revealed her thighs.

“You seem down today. Are you okay?”

“Hmm, do I? You might laugh, but I was really looking forward to the third floor. I thought we’d run into powerful opponents and fight a desperately close battle. But then...” I sighed, then Marie gave me a strange look as she took a sip from her glass of iced tea.

The third floor really had been a disappointment.

The enemies there were definitely stronger, and there were more formidable foes there than ever before. But that also meant there were more enemies that immediately knew Wridra and Shirley’s true nature. This meant that the monsters fled right away, never to be seen again. As for the great Arkdragon in question, she went back to bed to take a nap after eating breakfast.

I watched her sleeping comfortably, then picked up the glass on the table and presented it to the jellyfish-like creature floating in the room. It dropped some ice free of impurities into the glass, chilling the iced tea even further. Ice spirits sure were convenient. Though, it was drawn to the freezer for some reason and drifted over to it occasionally.

“The third floor feels strange, doesn’t it? I was especially bummed that we couldn’t fight that Heat Dragon,” I said.

“But it’s better if we can get through it easily. It gives me more time to read the books, look at the wall art, and enjoy your cooking, so I don’t mind at all,” Marie replied as she moved to tie her hair back. There was some morning anime playing now, and I realized her hair style resembled the character in the show. She combed through her hair with a brush that was close by, then bundled it to each side to make pigtails.

There was something magical about her appearance, with her white hair, pale skin, and eyes like precious stones. In fact, she really could use magic. The story in the anime was about saving people using magic, so her hairstyle was a fitting choice in that sense. And so, I brought over ribbons from the shelf and decided to help her out.

But with this hairstyle, it was hard to hide her long ears with the Magic Tool. In that case, it would probably have been better to add volume to the sides, but then she wouldn’t have resembled the character as much. As I went back and forth on this pointless conundrum, Marie was letting her feet dangle under her.

“It’s not as if you didn’t get to fight at all. The weak enemies that couldn’t recognize Wridra attacked us anyway,” she said.

“True. But personally... I’m not sure if you’d understand, but a man wants the thrill of a close battle.” She made a face as if to say she had no clue what I was talking about, and I nodded. I figured it must have been hard for a girl to grasp the concept of what I sought in a dungeon.

Our exploration through the labyrinth had continued for a few days since we’d started. Contrary to my expectations, things were moving rather smoothly. I just wished our peaceful time there would be compromised every once in a while. As I mentioned before, I just wanted to experience a difficult battle.

One of the distinct features of the third floor was that the number of intelligent monsters had increased. Many of them could think and act of their own will, meaning their attack patterns also increased in variety. We had conducted meetings on how to deal with them each time, discussing the locations of the weak points of their magic amplifying organs, how to destroy them, and the order in which we should defeat the enemies.

“Doula sure is reliable, isn’t she? The raid teams each have members with varying personalities, but she takes charge during the meetings really well.”

“I was surprised. Her level may not be all that high, but she’s very skilled when it comes to leading people. Maybe it has to do with her being a healer.” Her Team Andalusite focused on supporting the other teams with healing and putting up barriers. This meant her ability to assess the overall picture and determine how to provide backup came in handy. In that sense, maybe it was ideal for a healer to take charge overall.

Doula directed everyone toward the goal and made sure Zera didn’t get too tense. They were perfectly in sync with each other, almost like a married comedy duo.

“It all works out thanks to the firepower we have as a group. Us, Team Diamond, and that man Gaston. All the pieces fit together to make a cohesive unit.” Marie’s pencil danced across her notebook.

The main roles were divided as such: Eve and Zera’s team were on scouting duty, Puseri’s team would defend the vanguard, Doula’s team would support from the back, and our team would scan for enemies and act as a mobile attack unit.

Zera’s team was the most flexible and would rearrange unit placement depending on the enemy’s numbers and characteristics. Add in Marie’s ability to reshape the terrain, and you had yourself a simple fortress. Marie’s true strength was in group combat, and the fact that she could scan for enemies with Prison Keeper was a huge boon to the team.

“Hmm, I heard there’s about forty of us in total. Maybe that’s the best size for us to coordinate as a group,” I said.

“Yes, I think the fact that we don’t have many people dragging us down is a big factor. As you mentioned before, just having more people doesn’t necessarily translate into an advantage.” When the team size got too big, the Pareto Principle could come into effect. Those who thought they didn’t need to put in the work would just flee when faced with danger. This was the act of someone who couldn’t take on responsibility to begin with, but that attitude also lowered the morale of those around them. In this case, it was better for

them to not be there in the first place.

“It makes sense why Sir Hakam and Aja the Great insist on working with small elite teams when you think about it that way. I didn’t expect working in teams to be so interesting.”

We still had to figure out how to accept consumables and food. It cost far too much time to go back to the base on the second floor every time we needed something. But considering the danger, it was difficult to send just a few people at a time, so we had no choice but to move together with everyone.

“There’s one more issue we have to deal with. We split up whenever we go to sleep, right? Doula has asked me several times if we can all rest together,” Marie said.

“Right, things could get bad if they get attacked while we’re away.” That was actually the biggest headache right now. It was thanks to Wridra and Shirley that we weren’t getting attacked by powerful enemies. I was worried about them moving away from the others, but for some reason, there hadn’t been any night ambushes so far. This was an unexplored ancient labyrinth we were talking about. There should have been monsters that roamed around the area, so it was strange that we hadn’t encountered any.

As I mentioned this, Marie looked up at the ceiling.

“Now that you mention it, there’s something special about the third floor. It doesn’t seem like monsters are respawning as they usually do. It’s as if they vanish.”

“Vanish... It doesn’t seem likely, but that’s the only explanation I can think of.” Marie wrote “Monsters vanished” into her notebook, like the title of some suspense novel. If they really disappeared, where could they have gone? Did they flee like the Heat Dragon?

She continued filling the notebook with our current situation, questions, and issues. It was in our nature to become engrossed in such things, and we realized it was already eight o’clock.

“Oh, goodness. It’s almost time for you to get ready for work.”

“Hm, I completely forgot about Wridra. Can you wake her up later?”

“Okay!” Marie replied. I turned around to go and get dressed.

My commute wasn’t too long, but I didn’t like waiting until the last minute. Wridra was still fast asleep, but since she was visiting, I decided to start my day early.

I was curious what Marie and Wridra would do together though. Just looking up at the sky, I could tell it was probably going to be a hot day, but I couldn’t imagine Wridra reading a book indoors.

Well, there was no point thinking about that too deeply. They always found a way to enjoy themselves, so they would surely figure out some unique way to pass their time. I tightened my tie and put my hands through my suit sleeves.

§

Ding dong

The tall woman stood with her finger stretched toward the bell button with a surprised look on her face. It seemed this was her first time ringing a doorbell, and her obsidian eyes were alight with curiosity.

“Hm! That is as satisfying as the sound of splitting bamboo. I doubt anyone would mind if I press it again.”

“Please don’t. It’s embarrassing, and they might mistake us for some door-to-door solicitors.” The one who spoke up to protest was a head shorter than the first woman, the sunlight reflecting off of her white hair. She furrowed her brows as she tugged on the black-haired woman’s sleeve. This motion accentuated Wridra’s ample breasts, but she didn’t seem to mind in the slightest.

She wore a casual outfit with a tank top that revealed her shoulders and skintight jeans, but her model-like figure looked good even in the eyes of other women. Despite her looks, she sometimes acted like a child and ended up embarrassing her companions like this.

Moments later, they heard footsteps from the inside, and then the door opened.

The bespectacled woman was Kaoruko Ichijo. Her black hair came down to

her shoulders, and she greeted the two in a clean-looking blouse that wasn't too different from the outfits she usually wore when working at the library. As she opened the door, her usually gentle and straitlaced demeanor loosened into a smile.

"Welcome, you two. Please, come in."

"Excuse us." The two were accustomed to Japanese culture by now, and they bowed their heads before entering. Marie had visited Kaoruko's condo before, as they lived in the same complex, but it was the first time she had brought Wridra with her. Despite this being her first visit, Wridra was far from nervous.

"Yes, don't mind if I do. Ah, Kitase told me to give this to you." Kaoruko accepted the colorful box of snacks, and her eyes widened. Wridra had black hair and black eyes, but she had prominent Western features. That was why Kaoruko was surprised by Wridra's Japanese gesture. Still, she blinked her eyes and smiled.

"That's very kind of you. Oh, is this a souvenir from Grimland?"

"Yes, we had a lot of fun there thanks to your advice," Marie said with a smile, and Kaoruko's face turned pink. Marie had seemed cautious when they had first met, but she had softened over time as they saw each other at the library and enjoyed meals together, and Kaoruko felt like she was some kind of lovable fairy these days. It made her truly happy that she worked at the Koto Ward library.

Ah, what a wonderful perk! To think, I can even invite them over to my place! Kaoruko was getting emotional as she shouted internally, while her two guests tilted their heads in confusion.

Now, Kaoruko had chosen her room as a married couple, so unlike the Kitase household, the layout was designed for family use. That was why it was a 2LDK instead of 1DK, and it included extra storage space with design elements that made it easier to live in. The elf and dragon looked around with great interest.

The subdued interior was fitting for Kaoruko, and the place looked quite cozy. The sofa and large TV were perfect for viewing movies. They looked at the door beside the living room.

“Ah! So this is one of those rumored walk-in closets!”

“Ah! To be able to store clothing without folding it is quite a luxury in Japan!” The door slid open, and Marie and Wridra were awestruck. Kaoruko felt that they looked like a pair of cute sisters together, but she made a puzzled face as she wondered who was spreading rumors to them about walk-in closets.

“Come to think of it, you didn’t have one at your condo. Oh, are you staying at the Kitase household too, Wridra?”

“On occasion, yes. I cannot help but visit because his cooking is so good, but I worry about the cost of food. I am certain he does not make much income.”

Marie stared at Wridra as if to say, “But you’ve been eating your fill in cat form.” Yet, she wasn’t aware that Wridra worried about food costs, so she tugged on her black tank top.

“You should stop worrying about that and come over more often. Um, it’s fun being with you, Wridra, and I like going out with you like this.”

“Hah, hah, I must admit that is nice to hear. It does make me somewhat uncomfortable to receive so many kind words, but perhaps the three of us, including Kaoruko, could go on a picnic.” Kaoruko twitched at the unexpected suggestion. Ever since moving from Hokkaido to Tokyo with her husband Toru, she hadn’t made many local friends. Being invited to go out reminded her of her student days, and her face flushed with excitement.

“Absolutely! I love to cook too, so I can bring sandwiches in a picnic basket!”

“Oh, how fun! Then let’s all go out together when our schedules align.” They all chatted together like old friends and enjoyed the weekday afternoon together.

§

Her purple eyes widened at the rows of books lining the shelves. They stretched nearly up to the ceiling, and there were shelves on either side. It seemed this corner of the room was where they kept Kaoruko’s personal belongings, like novels, manga, and a computer on top of a desk. Combined with the video game console in the living room, it was clear she had a variety of hobbies.

“Wow, so many books!” Marie exclaimed.

“They’re not the kind that would be in the library though. I may not look it, but I’m a big fan of manga.” While Marie stared in awe at all the books, Wridra stood at the door and scratched her cheek. One could tell she was unamused without even looking at her face. She knew that Kitase and Marie often lost themselves in stories and wouldn’t budge once they started reading. She had experienced it many times as a cat, and so she sighed as she was reminded of the boredom.

“I prefer watching movies over following text with my eyes. Hm? This book has quite a colorful cover.”

“Yes, that one is purely for entertainment purposes, unlike most of what you’d find at the library. Japan is known for its manga. The one you’re holding is about boxing. Are you familiar with it? It’s a sport where you punch the opponent like this. It’s fun seeing the protagonist grow stronger through hard work.”

Seeing Kaoruko throw out a couple jabs, Wridra furrowed her brows with a displeased expression and said, “Hm.” She had no interest in such tiresome things as books in the first place. But it was hard to return it back to the shelf after getting such a recommendation, so she reluctantly began flipping through the pages. Then, her obsidian eyes widened slightly.

“Hm, there are more pictures than text. Hm, mhm, so these cloud-shaped objects contain the characters’ dialogue.”

“Yes, but have you never read manga before? I suppose they aren’t too common outside of Japan.” Perhaps dexterous Asian artists were most suited for drawing and putting together panels into a cohesive story. Manga had a deep history, spanning back to examples such as the Chōjū-giga from the Heian period. But the manga mentioned here were more commonly read for entertainment, and Kaoruko’s comment was strictly referring to manga sales outside of Japan.

Hm... Unlike a novel, the story is easy to understand just by following the drawings. It seems as if the characters themselves truly are talking. And these lines here make it seem as if the characters are moving.

Wridra began to develop an interest in manga and continued turning the pages.

The protagonist of the story was a timid character who got bullied by others. As he spent his days without joy, he came across the sport of boxing. It wasn't that he wished to become stronger, but it was more like he was curious to discover the extent of his own potential. With the guidance of a boxer he could rely on, he delved deeper into the world of boxing.

"Hmph, what a pathetic man. Why not bite his abuser's legs rather than cry about it? A man who simply curls up and takes the abuse is not a man at all."

"You say that, but I think it's wonderful when someone is giving their all for something. I just want to cheer them on so badly, my body starts moving on its own," Kaoruko said, looking a little embarrassed, but Wridra continued reading while looking rather upset.

After some time, the timid boy went through a change. Just for a moment, his expression changed to that of a man, and he showed a glimpse of the talent that his boxing senior had seen in him... When Wridra turned the page again, she realized she had finished the volume.

"Here's volume two," Kaoruko said.

"Ah, I thank you. It ended right when things were getting interesting. How pathetic it is that they would be so stingy with the number of pages." Wridra stood in place as she continued reading, then suddenly picked up a cushion from nearby and sat on the ground. She sat with her legs crossed, leaning over slightly in full-on reading mode.

"Unbelievable. She's not going to stop reading, is she?" Marie said.

"It seems she won't be moving for some time. I'll bring some tea over."

"My thanks," Wridra said without even looking up. But strangely, the iced tea and snacks next to her somehow disappeared over time.

She occasionally swayed side to side, and the sight of her being so focused on reading manga was an unfamiliar one even to the elf who lived with her.

Wridra had turned into a page-turning machine, so Kaoruko called over the

bored-looking Marie. She held a laptop in her hand, and Marie peered at the strange-looking monitor.

“Is that...a game?”

“Yes, it is. A character shows up on the screen, and you move it around with a controller... Wait, are you not familiar with games?” Marie shook her head.

Come to think of it, Kitase didn’t play games at all, but instead went out, cooked, or read novels in his free time. Rather, he didn’t feel like playing games because he had far more fun going on adventures in the dream world.

“My husband and I play together on his days off, but it just collects dust otherwise. Would you like to play with me?”

“Oh, but I don’t know how to play at all.”

“You’ll get used to it as you play. Give it a try!” Marie wasn’t sure what was going on as Kaoruko sat her down and showed her the screen.

She raised her voice in surprise as scenery more vivid than the real world spread out on the other side of the screen. The characters lined up there were equipped with armor, swords, and staves, and they reminded her of the atmosphere in the dream world.

“You can move your character with this button.”

“Oh, it moved! What? How? I’m sorry, could I have a minute? I need some time to process this.” Kaoruko was astonished that Marie really didn’t know what video games were, and she watched as the elf took several deep breaths to calm herself. She did look like a sheltered rich girl or some sort of lovable fairy and didn’t seem like the type who would play video games.

Maybe her parents were really strict about this sort of thing.

The thought crossed Kaoruko’s mind, and she wondered if she really should have been teaching Marie about games. But in the end, she let Mariabelle decide for herself. She would play with her if she was interested, and they would do something else if she wasn’t.

Marie took a deep breath, then turned back to Kaoruko.

“I think I get it now. It’s like a picture that moves, isn’t it?”

“Ah... Right, something like that... I think.” Marie’s tone was a bit more casual than before, perhaps because she was preoccupied with trying to understand the nature of the video game. But Kaoruko was pleased, as it made her feel closer to Marie.

What a strange girl, she thought as she handed Marie the controller. She looked taken aback by its weight for a moment, but the fact that she could control the characters freely seemed to pique her interest greatly.

“The main classes are tank, healer, and attacker. Which one would you like to try?” Kaoruko asked.

“Huh?!” Marie looked up at Kaoruko with wide eyes. The sight was so adorable, Kaoruko had to make a conscious effort not to swoon. When she was younger... No, she was *still* a huge fan of yuri novels, but she decided not to mention that out loud.

Marie was awestruck. She never thought it would have been possible to go on an adventure through such wonderful worlds using a controller. The fact that she could select a class freely was incredibly intriguing to her as well. Her face was pink with excitement as she replied to Kaoruko.

“Healer! I’ve always admired healers! How wonderful it would be to stay back and support everyone!”

“Oh, that’s quite a strange thing to admire. Then, please use one of my sub-characters. If you end up liking the game, you can make your own character from scratch. Kitase-san is very lenient when it comes to your requests, so he just might buy it for you if you ask.” Marie played through the tutorial with Kaoruko’s guidance.

With her intelligence, she was quick to learn how to heal and support the tank even when an enemy unleashed a powerful attack. Soon enough, she learned advanced techniques, such as casting spells while walking and continuous incantations.

“Hm, I can get an extra turn if I do it this way. Maybe I can throw in another attack here.”

She’s frightening! Kaoruko thought as she watched Marie mutter to herself

and smile as she picked up new strategies.

After playing for an hour or so, it was time to go into battle. Kaoruko's knight led the party into a dungeon.

Although Kaoruko was surprised by how quickly Marie was picking up the game, she was quite a skilled gamer herself. She knew how to keep an eye on the overall picture, and she was even composed enough to watch and enjoy Marie's growth.

It was a good thing they were sitting next to each other as they played as well. They could speak to each other directly, so they could communicate better than if they were playing online. And so, Marie looked at the horde of monsters before them and spoke.

"Oh, it's fine now. I'll handle the rest of them, so you can go on ahead."

"Understood. Then, I'll gather up the mobs for you."

They were terrifyingly competent and streamlined in their methods as they mowed down the foes. They were having fun playing an unusual game of "how efficiently can we defeat all the enemies," and their enjoyment only made their performance even better. The dungeon was cleared in record time.

Kaoruko blinked and stared at the score displayed on the screen.

"Mariabelle-chan, you're so good that you make my husband's gameplay look like trash."

"Hehe, I got the hang of it. But you were so quick with making calls. It was satisfying seeing you cut off useless allies right away. It was wonderfully played on your part."

She's frightening! Kaoruko thought again.

Anyone could clear games as long as they put in the effort. However, whether a game suited someone or not really depended on the individual, so it was natural that there would be a skill difference between one person and another. It was also true that the Spirit Sorceress who had accomplished much in the ancient labyrinth was quite compatible with this game.

Kaoruko felt that Marie was more reliable than anyone she had ever met, and

it seemed that together, she could finally achieve her dream of clearing the high difficulty content.

Kaoruko groaned in front of her computer. The air-conditioned room was comfortable even in the summer, and Marie was chewing a mouthful of freshly cooked yakisoba next to her. It was considered bad manners to eat in front of the game screen like this, but in Kaoruko's eyes, it seemed like Marie was enjoying this brand-new experience. She stared at her guest and thought, *We shouldn't challenge the highest difficulty stages when she just started two hours ago, right?*

Anyone who had experience playing games would say that it was a bad idea. It looked like a standard, casual fantasy game in appearance, but it was far from it. The game was designed so it was impossible to clear with luck alone, and one needed to learn the enemies' various attack patterns and how to deal with them. The average player would require months of practice before they could finally say, "Maybe I can beat it...in a month or so." Rumors say there were some who had gotten so deep into it that they lost their jobs.

Kaoruko still didn't know the depths of Marie's abilities. It was her day off today, so she just wanted to have fun spending time together. But now she had to know if her gaming partner truly was talented. She smiled at Marie.

"Marie-chan, what if I told you this was all just child's play up to this point?" She explained that there were greater heights to strive for, a world in a whole different dimension, and Marie's eyes lit up.

The sun set slowly, and Kaoruko's room was unusually heated.

The sound of buttons clicking reverberated endlessly, with Marie's and Kaoruko's voices thrown in the mix. Wridra sat with her legs crossed in the corner of their vision, but unlike usual, she remained mostly still as she continued to read manga.

If the ice spirit had been here, it probably would have turned tail and run. Mariabelle's expression was just that intense as she opened her mouth.

"Not on my watch! I'll negate that damage!"

"No way! Your timing was so perfect I didn't even see my HP decrease!"

“Keep your guard up. The next attack is coming.”

“O-Okie!”

The party was in a swell of excitement, with messages such as “This healer’s crazy” and “What a god” appearing on screen. However, not only did Marie not join in their celebration, but she clicked her tongue in frustration. She was annoyed by the fact that the others were wasting time typing such things in the middle of a fierce battle.

The original plan was for Kaoruko to support Marie. In fact, that was what they had done for the first hour or so. She had taught Marie about the enemy attack patterns and how to deal with them like a teacher would a student, which was evident by the notebook full of notes next to her. But Kaoruko had underestimated the girl’s learning abilities.

Marie’s talent had already manifested itself in the second battle. Their goal before was to practice together, but they were now aiming to clear the challenges before them. Not only did she learn how to keep herself from getting knocked out, but she started playing in a way that covered her allies’ mistakes.

As Kaoruko’s eyes spun dizzily, the boss’s HP gauge drew increasingly closer to zero. Once the boss reached this final stage, it began dishing out terribly wicked attacks. The boss started throwing out area-of-effect attacks that covered every direction, and as those who failed to evade them fell one by one, Marie gave up on resurrecting her allies and called out with a powerful voice.

“Take this! Arrow of Light, Quintuple Shot!” She unleashed five bolts of light, explosive sounds of destruction followed, and the screen went dark. Kaoruko stared at the monitor in confusion, then became speechless as an animation began to play.

“Huh? Wha? But they just added this content...” But seeing the enemy fall apart and the celebratory messages scrolling by in the chat, she found herself in a further state of stunned amazement.



Kaoruko felt a hand on her shoulder and turned around with her glasses still askew. Marie stood there with a confident smile, gesturing for a high five with her small hand. Their hands clapped together, and a smile spread over Kaoruko's face as the sense of accomplishment finally set in.

"Marie-chan! We did it!"

"Hehe, great work!" They cheered and hugged, jumping up and down after having overcome the intense battle. The hours of struggle and perseverance had finally come to an end, and Wridra even put her manga reading on pause to look up at the two. Though, her expression was that of annoyance at all the noise they were making.

When they looked outside, they realized the sun had set long ago.

Wridra finally finished reading her manga and slowly rose from the sofa. But the other two looked at her, and their eyes widened.

"Huh? Wait, Wridra's face looks really gallant right now!"

"Why do you look like you just fought a battle?!"

Some sort of change had come over Wridra after she went through dozens of volumes of the boxing manga. There was a dauntless expression on her face, and the light shining on her made her look like the protagonist of a sports manga.

"I have an inexplicable urge to shadowbox. Hm, the string for that fluorescent light seems perfect for punching." With that, she swung her arms around, her fist snapping forward like she was cracking a whip. Seeing this, the other two burst out chuckling, which escalated to holding their sides as they laughed out loud. Though, perhaps Wridra really did have the ability to become the world champion...

And so, their computer screen displayed a message stating they had obtained legendary equipment, along with a massive number of friend requests.

They hadn't actually achieved much of note, but they finished their weekday with a sense of accomplishment.

Having finished his work for the day, the man finally arrived at his condo and

looked up. He heard cheerful laughter from the floor above and recognized the familiar voices.

“Ah, Marie had mentioned she would go over to her place. I should bring over the pears I bought.” He pictured their happy faces as they ate the pears and smiled. Those smiles would surely make the summer heat more tolerable. Kitase pressed the elevator button, having no idea that Wridra’s dramatized expression would be awaiting him.

Chapter of Midsummer, Episode 12: “Demon Arms”

Kartina

Third floor of the ancient labyrinth, central control room—

In the dim room, the dull light of the terminal illuminated its surroundings.

A woman with an unhealthy complexion was sitting in a chair, muttering to herself as she stared at the screen.

Their group had been trapped in this room, and several days had passed since their food supply was cut off. Before, they would have relied on the hero candidate’s support and stolen rations from enemy soldiers, but that was no longer an option. Zarish had gone missing, and now that there were only elite fighters being sent in, there weren’t any opportunities to take their supplies. Thus, they were withering away by the day.

“Damn it, this one’s in the way. If we can crush her early...” The dingy woman muttered to herself as she navigated the terminal, playing some bits of footage over and over. They were the battle logs from the past week or so, and she had already grown accustomed to the controls.

She was so focused on her analysis that she didn’t realize someone was at the entrance. When a voice called to her, Kartina shuddered as if she had been shocked with an electric current.

“Working hard, I see. Did you figure anything out?”

“Ah?! Apologies for not noticing you, Captain.” The former knight moved to salute out of old habits, but the captain with the stubbly beard stopped her. He then wordlessly gestured for her to report her analysis. The woman cleared her throat, then pointed at the footage.

“Yes, I was just going over the enemy’s strategy...or rather, their tactics. This elf is the one that caught my attention. Please take a look.” The captain peered into the terminal, and a young elven sorceress appeared on screen. Despite her beautiful appearance, it was clear from the footage that she was the key to the

battle.

She was a Spirit Sorceress, an extremely rare class that could modify the terrain and reveal soldiers in hiding if left alone.

The scariest part about her was her seemingly endless reserves of magic and the fact that she could set up a defensive line to prepare to wipe out her opponents. Once it got to that point, there was nothing that could be done. While their forces tried to tear down those defenses, her team's powerful offense broke through and caused catastrophic damage.

"Hm, if we can take out that girl, their entire team falls apart. But the monsters can't follow such specific orders. That is, unless there's a powerful unit among them to lead the group."

"Yes, that's why I find this so frustrating."

The captain rubbed his chin, deep in thought. He had already noticed this some time ago. However, the powerful patrol-type monsters had already left the field, and he couldn't think of any way around their issues. But was that all there was to it? Was this floor so easy that a single elf in their party allowed them to waltz right through it? He had no reason to think so, but he couldn't help but wonder if something more terrible was lurking among them.

Setting the thought aside, he decided to propose a plan to deal with the elf. And so, he spoke to the former knight.

"Come with me. I have a lead for you."

"Huh? Y-Yes, sir!" The woman watched as the captain walked away, his boots clicking against the floor, then followed him in a hurry. She hadn't noticed the change in her surroundings because she had been so focused on her analysis. Kartina didn't find it odd that the room had become completely silent and that there wasn't another soul to be found.

They passed by the room next door, where her former colleagues lay on the ground. Their bodies convulsed, their eyes darting around frantically. It appeared they had been dosed with some kind of toxic muscle relaxant.

A well-built man was also lying among them on the ground. The man who had abused Kartina gritted his teeth as he growled at her.

“That...bastard...!” The screams of resentment from the others also reverberated in the dim room. As they cried wordlessly, the dark sorcerer approached them from behind with a syringe in hand.

There was nothing to worry about.

They were only taking one step closer to being a monster.

The sound of heels clicking against the floor echoed through the labyrinth.

The relief carvings on the walls weren't just there for decoration. They contained magic related to death and could kill intruders by inflicting a curse upon them. The traps, monsters, and layout of the labyrinth all existed to kill intruders. Kartina looked up at them uneasily.

“Why do you look so afraid? They won't attack us.”

“Y-Yes, but they look so eerie. It's as if they're watching us.” The captain let out a sigh of disappointment at her pathetic comment. The woman still looked around anxiously, then spoke up as if to distract herself.

“So, why *don't* they attack us? I of course know that we have monster blood within us. But I haven't heard too much of the details.”

“Hm? Right, I'm sure you haven't. Only a select few know the details, even within Gedovar. I understand why you're afraid of this labyrinth too.”

“I-I'm not afraid...! It's just that I don't like this feeling of being cornered.”

Cornered. That word perfectly described their motherland, the country of Gedovar's history. That single word sent a ripple through the man's heart. The captain slowed his pace slightly, then opened his mouth after a pause.

“We were once called monsters. Back then, our ancestors toiled for the coming Age of Demons and Age of Night. The remnants from those days were passed down to us through our blood...” His resonant voice and the bizarre surroundings made him sound like some sort of prophet.

The young woman had fallen silent, strange emotions whirling about inside her. The captain, who usually didn't speak much, was unraveling the past for her alone. As they walked, she felt the presence of others less and less around her.

“Having been defeated and with their land stripped from them, our ancestors suffered as their bloodline grew weaker over time. But they left us a powerful weapon for the future generations.” Something slowly came into view ahead of them. It looked like some sort of metallic demonic figure that had been split down the middle. That was why she thought the black objects scattered across the ground were entrails.

It was hard to make out the details with it being hunched over, but it was about two meters in height. Something about it was different from the monsters and statues she had seen until now. Seeing it sitting there in the middle of the room, Kartina felt a strong sense that something was wrong with the picture.

“Is this the weapon you mentioned earlier?”

“No... I was talking about you lot, Kartina. Flesh and blood.” Kartina didn’t understand. But the captain’s voice had turned cold as ice, sending a shiver down her spine. It was as if she was being drawn into a witch’s forest. Her face grew stiff at the thought of the nightmare awaiting her.

His hand closed around her wrist, and she shuddered at how cold it was. Fear. Pure fear surged through her as her instincts set off alarm bells and her knees began to shake, violently, and without shame.

Yes, she was afraid.

Something unknown awaited her, and she feared that she would be changed forever.

In fact, her movements were bound by a powerful curse. Kartina just stood there, fearing her impending fate like a helpless sheep as her clothing and armor were ripped off, and then she realized she only felt sensation from the neck up.

“Haah! Haah! Haah! Haah!” She breathed heavily, her eyes darting about frantically.

Her breasts were exposed to the cold air, along with her stomach and buttocks, and yet she couldn’t move an inch. Like a deer in headlights, she was frozen in place. Her legs trembled. Just moments before her death, she

managed to squeeze out the words.

“C-C-Captain, w-wa... Please, wait...”

The pair of honey-colored eyes stared at her curiously. However, it wasn't that he was complying with her request, but he placed his finger over her eyelid, as if searching for something behind her eyeball. It felt as if it was some sort of ritual that went beyond humans and demons, and Kartina was so petrified that she didn't notice something warm was running down her leg from her crotch.

“Pulse is abnormal, magic levels in the blood are as according to reports. Good. Hm, now that you've been exposed like this, I see you have quite the healthy body. In a different time, I'm sure you would have left strong children for the next generation. However...”

The last word came out in a faint whisper. His lips moved closer to her trembling neck, then spoke softly into her ear.

“Luckily for you, an opportunity for you to be useful has just presented itself.” His icy hand grasped her neck, and her legs began walking against her will. She walked forward with her bare feet, and then the metal demonic figure from earlier was placed before her.

“Now, Kartina, sit here. Fulfill your duty to your motherland as a former knight.” She absolutely didn't want to sit on that thing. Despite thinking so, her knees bent of their own accord, and she felt the cold metal against her rear. She shivered, but the horror was just beginning.

A finger against her forehead pressed her down deeper, and a sudden shock ran through her. Something cold pierced into a piece of her spine, and she felt the chill of some sort of fluid flowing into her.

“Ah! Ah! Ahhh! What... What is this?! What just stabbed me?!”

“They're known as Demon Arms, weapons that have been prepared since ancient times. Now, sit all the way down. If it doesn't go in properly, you just might regret it forever.” There was something hauntingly convincing about his tone, and the warm fluid she thought she had depleted ran down her thigh again.

She wanted it to stop. It would have been better to lose consciousness rather than live through such terror. Despite her wishes, she still had plenty of bones in her spine left. A horrible ripping sound could be heard as something stabbed into one after another, injecting them with some sort of fluid and inflicting dread on her heart. She didn't expect such a thing to happen in her wildest dreams just a few minutes ago, and she couldn't understand why it was happening now.

"Agh, ah... Aaarghhh!" Something cold wrapped around her thigh, and her femur was injected next. Kartina's bare body buckled back as the infestation progressed, and she convulsed with her toes splayed out as far as they would go. Eventually, her body was left in a terribly cruel state.

"Ah, congratulations. It seems to like you."

"What?" Kartina realized her vision was obscured, and her eyes went wide with a different kind of horror this time. The metallic "thing" was trying to swallow her entire body. She desperately struggled and cried for help, but the statement from the captain she had admired so much didn't make any sense.

"Yes, your analysis from earlier was correct. Your first duty, 'Demon Arms' Kartina, is to eliminate that elf." He gave an encouraging wave, and Kartina's vision was completely blocked off. She let out one last shriek as everything went dark.

§

The elf girl was the first to notice that something was wrong.

Her purple eyes widened, focused on the miniature tower ahead. The tower had the ability to detect enemies in the area, which was why she was able to notice quicker than everyone else. She grabbed the boy next to her by his hand and began to sprint.

"Huh? What's wrong, Marie?"

"I'll explain later! I need to report to Doula, now!" she said with a panicked expression, running through the other party members that were pressing forward with their invasion. They were far smaller than those around them, but they finally managed to find the person they were searching for. The red-haired

woman, Doula, was surprised to see the two run up to her out of breath.

“What’s wrong, Marie? Did something happen?”

“Yes, it’s suspicious that there are so few monsters on the third floor,” Marie replied, then pointed her staff at the Magic Tool in Doula’s hand. This gesture imparted her Prison Keeper’s ability to Doula, and points of light appeared on her map.

“Oh no...!” Doula turned pale. The map showed that there were absolutely no monsters in their vicinity. And farther beyond, there was a massive horde of monsters taking the long route around the raid team.

“Unless I’m mistaken...it looks like the monsters are moving like an organized unit. They’re not just waiting for us to approach.” Even Zera couldn’t hide his surprise. The monsters they had seen until now were feral, and they attacked anyone who came into view. But their movement was much more systematic now, and it was completely different from their previous behavior.

After giving it some thought, Doula turned her heel.

“Zera, you keep brainstorming with these two and figure out how to deal with this. I’ll stop the advance and call Team Diamond back from the vanguard,” she said, demonstrating her ability to adapt to any given situation. But with so few situational clues to work with, Doula figured it would be better to rely on Zera’s animalistic instincts. This couple had a tendency to facilitate growth in one another by being together. That was how they had climbed to become the center of the raid team despite being relatively low level compared to the others.

“All units, halt!” Doula ordered, and dozens of boots stomped to a halt at once. Zera watched the display of control and order, then rubbed his chin in thought.

“Hm, the monsters are taking another route to avoid getting found. Something’s fishy for sure. And according to Eve’s report, there’s a big, open hall up ahead.”

The boy replied, “Yeah, judging by their movements, they could be trying to pin us from both sides. Which means...”

“They could be setting up an ambush in the hall ahead,” Marie said. Zera’s finger tapped the hilt of his sword as he listened. There was no other route they could use to bypass the hall, so going straight through was their only option. Although they were making decent progress, Zera had the feeling they were only about halfway through the third floor.

Their pace was quite good thanks to having a small but efficient team, but their composition wasn’t without its drawbacks. Since they were few in numbers, it would take them that much longer to fully explore the area. But despite that disadvantage, Zera could feel the raid team’s heightened morale.

The sense of unity here was palpable. Each soldier was putting their all into this mission, and the reservations and boundaries that once divided them were dissolving away. Things were looking good so far, but since their forces couldn’t be replaced, incurring casualties could bring about catastrophic results.

Yet in Zera’s mind, he knew they couldn’t retreat now. They had to find out what traps lay ahead eventually, so there would be no point in turning back. In fact, that would only have given the enemy more time to prepare, so they had to press forward despite the risk.

“Hmm, I’m starting to get the hang of the patterns here, but once we enter that hall, we should assume we won’t be able to leave until the battle ends.”

“I agree. It seems the enemy is acting with that in mind too.”

“Say, how about we move toward the hall entrance? Then I can scan the area and assess the situation better,” Marie suggested, but Zera and Kazuhiho asked her to wait. They wanted to avoid getting attacked from both sides if the enemy approached from behind. Realizing just how tense the situation was, a drop of cold sweat ran down the elf girl’s forehead.

“Sounds like you’re having a fun little chat here. Mind if I join?”

“Gaston, what have you been up to until now?” Kazuhiho asked, and the graying man shot him a glare that was unexpectedly intimidating for his age. For some reason, he seemed to dislike the younger man since the incident from the other day. After all, food-related grudges ran quite deep. There was a tension in the air, but when they explained the situation, the old man flashed an undaunted grin.

“Hmm, this third floor’s pretty...how do you put it...human. Your average shit-for-brains monster wouldn’t ever think to strategize against us and concentrate their manpower into one point.”

“Now that you mention it, this is kind of human-like behavior...” the young boy replied, and he and Mariabelle groaned as they became absorbed in their thoughts. They wouldn’t budge until they reached a conclusion once they got like this, so the others left them to their thoughts and regrouped with Team Diamond to come up with a game plan. Though, all they could do was reconnaissance in force, so they decided to continue their march while on maximum alert. The clash between the Arilai elite forces and Gedovar’s sabotage team was about to begin.

§

Fsssh...

Marie’s Prison Keeper emerged from the ground at a spot immediately in front of the hall entrance. The stone pavement clacked together as they turned over one after another, and a tower as thick as a log appeared. Its number of floors increased over time, extending its search range at the same time. Another floor was added every thirty seconds, and the number of lights indicating the enemies on the map increased...

Crack! The tower was destroyed by a powerful ranged attack. The elf had tried setting up a tower from a safe position, but it seemed the enemy was learning. They now understood that they would suffer the consequences if they let Mariabelle do what she wanted.

“I wanted to set up the tower at the entrance because it’s not nearly as effective from the outside, but this isn’t working.”

“The enemy’s on high alert. Looks like they’re afraid of what you’re capable of,” I said lightheartedly, but then let out an uneasy sigh. I couldn’t help but feel cautious about the fact that the enemy was now beginning to interfere with our search operations. With the monsters’ strange movement patterns and now this, I had a feeling someone was pulling strings behind the scenes.

“Rumors say the rebels in hiding have the ability to conceal their entire group,” I said.

“I was thinking the same thing. The monsters’ movements have been strange too. They’re too well coordinated,” Marie replied.

“Yeah, something’s fishy. I feel like a piece of the puzzle just fit into place.”

Monsters weren’t capable of thinking enough to make such strategic moves. There must have been someone giving them directions...somewhere in the depths of this pitch-black room.

The other soldiers sensed the threat in the air as well. And soon, they would be forced to fight without the enemy positions being revealed. Many could die as a result.

But as proud elite fighters, none of them feared facing death. We of Team Amethyst always had a way out, but I didn’t want others to die unnecessarily. I cracked my neck and looked to my side to see Wridra clad in armor and Shirley, the blonde woman, looking at me.

“What is it? You do not seem as excited as usual.”

“I may not seem like it, but I do know how to read the room. More importantly, I was hoping you could keep Marie and Shirley safe today.”

She let out an amused “Hmph,” which I took to mean it would be a piece of cake for her. I was relieved. There weren’t many beings out there who were a match for Wridra, and if such an opponent was around, we probably would have been aware of it by now. That was one less thing to worry about.

It meant that it was probably better for me to relax and focus on swinging my sword. In other words, just do what I usually do.

“All right, don’t forget to adjust the settings for Mind Link Chat... Oh wait, Shirley can’t talk. Well, I’ll just keep an eye on your gestures.” Shirley smiled, then clenched a fist to show she would be fine. I still hadn’t had a chance to see her display her powers, but I had a feeling she didn’t really need any protecting at all. It was strange how reliable she seemed, despite her complete lack of weapons or armor.

Just then, I heard a voice through Mind Link Chat.

“Get ready to move, everyone. Since we don’t know what the enemy is

planning, expect to be on the defensive side at first. You only need to keep two things in mind: keep an ear open for my orders at all times, and don't give into fear and flee from battle."

As Doula finished her statement, her Team Andalusite began chanting their hymn at once. It began with a low-pitched "Ahhh," which reverberated in the ears of everyone gathered in the corridor. Their voices gradually increased in volume, then began to introduce a melody into the mix.

The sound was like fire burning upon a log. It seemed to heighten their very heartbeats, awakening the warrior's blood inside of them. The Paladin looked around, and then her high-pitched voice resounded across the room.

"May our souls find their way to Eden! Team Bloodstone! Formations!"

"Rahhh!" Military boots could be heard stamping the ground as the soldiers moved into formation, and their intensity was enough to make one's hair stand on end.

Team Bloodstone was chosen to take the vanguard due to their high adaptability. They were Doula's most useful unit, as they could freely switch between offensive and defensive roles. The man at the lead grinned maniacally, not a shred of fear in his expression.

"Aha, you're gonna fall for me all over again, Doula! Let's make kids when we get back!"

"I-I wouldn't mind that."

Oof, they just flirted over Mind Link Chat with everyone listening in. But this raid team wasn't the type that would let such a small thing affect them. I laughed with the red-faced Marie, and the vanguard unit finally began their charge.

They advanced through the door with organized, military steps, and Marie's light spirits wove into the opening. The spirits shined brightly, illuminating the vast hall before them.

The ceiling was too high to see, and there was a black, viscous luster to the walls, like some sort of ink had been applied to them. The monsters awaiting us here were quite shocking to see. Dozens of big, metal shields were placed side

by side, countless pairs of demonic eyes glinting in the spaces between them. A giant, stout figure could be seen farther in the back.

The figure was about four meters in height. On its shoulders were strange attachments that looked like caterpillar heads, and its skin was unsightly and dense, like partially melted iron. Judging by the haze in the air around it, it must have been emitting quite a lot of heat. Thanks to my studies in the ancient languages, I could barely make out the name, Borlax Doudou.

The creature tore at its cheeks and screamed.

The grating noise was enough to make the average person claw at their own head.

The very air trembled, but the warriors didn't halt their march. It wasn't that they didn't feel fear. They simply knew that if they gave into fear and lost their will to fight, the shame would be unbearable. Doing so would make them undeserving of entering Eden.

I had a feeling someone else was watching us too. It could have been my imagination, but it felt like someone was after a certain elf girl next to me rather than myself. I glanced around but couldn't find the source, which only made me more uneasy. Despite the eerie, ominous air in the room, the raid team continued advancing forward.

Once everyone stepped foot inside and the two forces faced each other like pieces on a chessboard, the door would close completely. But no one here was afraid of losing their way out. The row of enemies wielding large shields ahead showed that they were the enemy to be defeated. That meant there was no need to turn around until they were all completely wiped out.

Team Andalusite's hymn continued on with its mixture of high-and low-pitched tones. Not only did they bolster their forces' morale, but their muscles became visibly swollen as they listened. As long as their song continued, they would fight on as indomitable warriors.

The raid consisted of four teams with a total of forty-four members. On the other end, the monsters outnumbered us by multiples, with shielded monsters positioned as if they were going to war and reserve soldiers hiding in the back.

The towering upper body of Borlax Doudou was visible beyond the seemingly unbreakable shield wall. The extra heads on his shoulders groaned ominously, and pale blue embers could be seen floating around behind his irregular set of teeth.

“That one looks strong. It may be a mid boss, but it might even be over level 100.”

Wridra’s obsidian eyes turned to me, but I smiled, assuring her I wasn’t asking for advice. As usual, Wridra wasn’t set as a member of our party, due to her level being far too high for us. The Arkdragon was also careful not to give us too much help or advice so we could grow and learn of our own accord.

The same went for Shirley. In fact, neither of them even had the bracelet needed to open up their status menu, so they couldn’t join our party in the first place. Mind Link Chat was also a party feature, but according to the great Arkdragon, analyzing and breaking into the chat was quite easy for her to do.

Our team was positioned right next to Team Andalusite, led by Doula. We were at the safest, centermost position, where we could also get orders from the leader directly. This was likely because she wanted to keep Mariabelle nearby for her tactical abilities and Spirit Sorcery.

“Man, the third floor has been chilly, but it’s kind of hot in here with so much energy in the air.” The fervor and excitement all around us was a bit stifling. I noticed Marie was looking a bit nervous as I was flapping my collar and decided to speak to her.

“This is gonna be a lot of work, facing so many of them at once, huh? Wanna help me figure out a way to deal with them easily?”

“Easily...? But we don’t even know what their abilities or numbers are. I don’t even know where we can set up a defensive perimeter with stone spirits at this point.” Marie had been glancing around anxiously, and she looked a bit pale as she replied. Judging by her expression, she must have been worried about the potential casualties. It was understandable, considering we had practically become closer friends after working together for so many days.

But getting too worked up or nervous would have the opposite effect for us. I thought back to previous battles. We had always overcome challenges through

creativity and inspiration. It was better if we could relax and try to enjoy the fight. Even if a fearsome enemy awaited us, we had to focus on enjoying the moment and overwhelming the opponent.

And so, I flashed my usual, relaxed smile.

“Remember what you said before, Marie? In this world, you can test out your powers to your heart’s content as long as you have me and Wridra with you.”

“Yes, but this time, our enemy seems to be countering my tactics.” She had been casting her Prison Keeper for a while now, but it didn’t seem to be working by the look on her face and the fact that the tower wasn’t emerging from the ground. There may have been a spellcaster among the enemies that could interfere with her magic. Since we couldn’t know what was going on for sure yet, it was best to give up on scanning the enemies for now.

I took Marie by the hand and looked into her purple eyes.

“Why don’t we try changing our mindset? If they were an army instead of a horde of monsters, how should we deal with a shield wall like that?”

“Oh, fine. I’ll play along. There you go, leading me on like that as usual. So, let’s see. Since their defenses are so tight at the front, I’d want to hit them from the flank or rear.” Shirley watched our conversation with a curious expression, her outfit more suited for a noble’s manor rather than a battlefield. She tilted her head, and Wridra chuckled merrily beside her.

“Hah, hah, this is simply how they are. They come up with outlandish ideas like children to tear down sandcastles the enemy builds up with as little effort as possible. For their opponents, nothing can be more frustrating.” Shirley seemed rather impressed, her sky blue eyes widening as she listened. It may have seemed strange in their eyes, but we humans had to use our heads to survive. I had to do what I could to come up with a way to succeed.

Marie had been lost in thought for some time, but then she put a finger to her chin and spoke up.

“Is that even possible? Can we arrange a formation that protects our frontline while attacking their flank?”

“Hmm, even if we could, it would take a lot of time to set up if the scale is too

big. Maybe if we narrow it down, like in an 'L' shape, it would be possible.”

“Ah, if we used the corners of the hall, we wouldn't need to cover such a wide area. But I don't like how that would leave us completely cornered. What if we used height to our advantage, like a building?” The fact that we were coming up with one idea after another was a good sign. As we brought up ideas on how to tackle our problem and how to cover the areas where we were lacking, Marie began to visibly relax.

It seemed Doula had been listening as we came up with our defensive strategy. Her red hair swayed as she turned around and showed us a spirited smile.

“I like that idea. Hope you don't mind if we join in on your fun. We'll start by bolstering our forces on the right corner and clearing enough space to set up a defensive perimeter.” It seemed everyone had finished entering the room, and we heard the door slowly moving shut. Doula shouted her orders, and the troops immediately moved in a diagonal formation.

The door was moments away from closing all the way.

Doula continued giving out her orders in order.

“Kazuhiho, Gaston, Eve—you three assess the situation and attack as you see fit. But keep in mind to always follow my orders. And Team Diamond, don't make any drastic moves until I give the green light.” Each unit responded in the affirmative, and then the sound of the door closing rang out in the hall. Marie's long ears trembled, but there was considerably less fear in her expression now. The fact that we had come up with a plan seemed to have reassured her somewhat.

This time, I had many more tasks to complete than usual. I had sensed someone targeting Marie earlier, which meant it was likely that the enemy knew a lot about our strategies. That meant I had to keep an eye out for any strange movements, try to find the spellcaster interfering with Marie's magic, and be cautious about Borlax Doudou in the far back of the room.

The thought made me smile.

It was exciting having so many things to do. I would have hated it if they were

tasks at work, but this was a fantasy world where I could have as much fun as I wanted.

Feeling myself getting worked up, I tightened the grip on my sword.

Just then, the battle music began to play.

Suddenly, some extremely high-pitched voices rang out. They sounded like women crying, layering onto each other to pierce into the listeners' eardrums even as they were covered up. The silence just moments before was shattered by the women's terrifying voices, which gradually began to form a rhythm. The sound of drums joined in, creating a sort of hysterical music.

The enemy troops began to move along to the rhythm. The shields at their front line moved diagonally to match our formation, looking like a solid iron wall closing in on us.

"Our battle begins! Team Bloodstone, draw your swords!"

Steel swords were brandished between the row of shields in response to the shouted order. The enemy's wall shield units stepped forward at the exact same time, marking the start of their death march to the music.

They moved slowly, emphasizing just how heavy their units were. But seeing the wall closing in from the front was stiflingly oppressive, and I had a feeling those were no ordinary shields. But Doula raised her sword without fear and shouted her order.

"Secure a defensive perimeter! Dead slow ahead!" Team Bloodstone's boots rang out, scraping the ground as they moved toward the enemy at a set pace. The space between the two forces gradually decreased along with the rhythm. Eventually, a row of black spears emerged from between the monsters' shields. A black, tar-like fluid had been applied to the spear points, and I realized it was the same color as the walls in the room.

I looked away from the monster army and their black flag and glanced toward the back. There was a small space that had opened up in the far back corner after their forces had moved forward. I watched Marie begin to control her stone spirits after casting her incantation, confirmed that Wridra and Shirley were watching over her, then decided to make my move.

“I guess I’ll go check things out on that side then. I’m curious what’s going on beyond those shields.”

“Understood. But could you keep talking into Mind Link Chat like this? I want to keep hearing your voice.” It warmed my heart to hear her say that. It made me happy to know she relied on me, and I wanted to hear Marie’s pretty voice too. But it seemed she had a different intention.

“I mean, your voice just sounds so carefree. I’ve come to realize that it’s just the right amount of energy for me.”

Wait, carefree? But I’m being serious here. I told her I would be right back and teleported to the wall near the enemy’s flank. My view changed immediately, and I quickly stuck out my sword to impale the wall. I noted the black material on the enemies’ spears also coated this wall.

Hanging from the sword I had stabbed the wall with, I looked directly below me.

I couldn’t see them with their wall shields in the way, but they were definitely monsters. They had a stout build just like the mid boss, and their thick arms were long enough to reach the ground.

The way the enemy forces were gathered together and moving collectively made it look like they were a single creature. I noticed one of their units was carrying something big, and there were magic users casting an incantation around it, then felt the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

“Whoa, that’s bad news. That ogre’s a suicide bomber, right?” I felt my heart skip a beat. I turned to face the gruff voice that had come from right beside me. Gaston was lurking in the shadows, staring with a glint in his eyes that was unbecoming his age.

“Y-Yes... How long have you been there, Gaston?”

“Huh? The hell are you talkin’ about? You’re the one that came to me. Anyway, time to take that one out, Eve.” I was taken by surprise for a second time. I didn’t even realize someone had landed on the sword I had stuck into the wall and crouched down. I liked to think I had a well-trained intuition to keep myself from being caught off guard, but it didn’t seem to have an effect on

these two.

“Sure thing. We’re the makeshift mobile attack team, right? Kazu, Gramps, let’s show up everyone who’s been calling us stupid idiots all this time,” Eve said.

“Ha ha, don’t lump me in with you two,” Gaston replied. With that, the old man released his hand without hesitation. I also kicked off of the wall, landing in the cluster of enemies the next moment. I wasn’t sure if it was a good idea, but then I was shocked for a third time when I realized the other two were already there with me. I didn’t know how they did it, but they were as fast as my teleporting skill was.

But I had to show these two I was no slouch either.

Right after landing, Gaston and I swung our weapons to chop off the heads of the monsters on either side of us, and they finally raised their voices in alarm.

As the mobile attack unit, Doula expected us to disrupt the enemy as efficiently as possible, rather than just attack haphazardly. They were counting on us for our mobility, offensive capabilities, and insight, so it was our role to take out the suicide bombers before they could reach their targets.

I sliced up the monster with curses written all over its body, then immediately started moving to the next target. Meanwhile, Eve seemed to be troubled by something for a moment, then slid up behind me. Despite being taller than me in this state, she hid completely out of the enemy’s view by crouching like a cat.

“I’m going this way. You and Eve handle the other side,” Gaston called out.

“Hmm, this is my first time teaming up with you like this, Kazu. How exciting.”

It seemed things were moving along without my input. I mentally shrugged it off, ignoring the ax swinging toward my head and teleporting forward while piercing an enemy’s neck in one motion. Our surroundings reeked of monster stench, and black monster blood sprayed onto the ground. Another ogre approached from behind, but its vision was obscured by a set of tanned thighs before it ate a powerful kick from below.

I was impressed. Her legs had moved in a perfect arc, leaving a dazed ogre before me. I swiftly cut out its windpipe, and then Eve’s dagger cut the tendons

of the monster's massive arm that was swinging at me from the left.

Oh, I see. She had been backing me up. I was surprised by the deftness of her movements, but she had always seemed adept at martial arts. I thought about what a competent ninja she was as I cut through the ogre's neck.

Now, I had ended up joining in on this offense, but I disliked being in the middle of a fray like this. It really was a pain having enemies blocking my view in every direction. There was so little room that I could only teleport a step or two away, and they could prevent me from teleporting completely if they surrounded me all the way around.

But we could attack quickly thanks to Eve's support, and the enemy was encumbered by the explosives. Plus, they were grouped up, but they didn't want to catch their own in the explosions, so we had several advantages on our side.

I memorized the most optimal attack and evasion patterns with Overload as we made our way through the confined space. Then, just like with Reprise, I began to require less and less concentration to maintain it. All I had to do was stand in the optional positions, and my body went through the attack pattern automatically.

"Well, this is nice and easy."

"Isn't it? You and I make a good team. Why don't you just join Team Diamond already? We have some crazy tricks up our sleeve. We even have a member that can cast skill enchantments." So they had someone who could grant skills to others. Those were a bit different from buffs that temporarily increased one's stats. I had to admit I was curious, but we had to deal with the suicide bombers for now.

Then, it hit me. What if I memorized Eve's attack patterns too? After all, my skill had been upgraded, and the number of move slots had been increased too. From the looks of it, Eve was extremely adept at hitting her enemies right on the chin and knocking them out. I decided to give it a try, and our teamwork became more and more refined as I memorized various attack patterns.

It reminded me of something...pounding mochi as a pair. What we were doing now was basically a sped up version of pounding mochi with a mallet.

Immediately after Eve's kick smacked a monster on the chin, my sword impaled it through the throat. She then turned on her heel to deliver a spin kick into an ogre's back, and I followed up with the finishing blow in the next instant. As we fell into the groove of killing off the enemies, Eve looked rather elated.

"Whoa! This is crazy, Kazu! We're, like, pretty much unstoppable!" Beads of sweat poured down from Eve's head as she spoke.

I couldn't blame her for feeling good about it. The moment she stunned the enemy with a strike from her palm, knee, or foot, he died. Her movements sped up over time, turning into a raging storm that couldn't be stopped by the sluggish bombers.

Starting to get carried away, Eve leaped forward and knocked down her enemies in seconds, laughing cheerfully the entire time. The monsters around her looked a bit terrified, and even I was beginning to feel sorry for them.

Before I knew it, we had taken out the suicide bomb squad, and the enemies still standing were the heavily armored kind.

I wiped the sweat off of my forehead and called out to the dark elf.

"I think that should do it for now. Eve, we should head back."

"Whaaat? Just a little longer. Come on, let's keep going."

So, she's gonna be difficult. But I didn't have time to deal with this, so I held her by her slender waist and teleported toward the wall.

"Kyaaa!"

We left her scream behind as we reappeared at the new location, and I embedded my sword into the wall. My teleportation had restrictive weight limits on it before, but I had a wider variety of movement options after upgrading to Overload. I wondered what Gaston was doing, when I heard a loud sound from below.

The sound of charging feet and clashing weapons. It had begun. The frontlines of the two sides had clashed. We had taken out those suicide bombers, so I didn't have to worry about that for now. I watched the situation directly below us, waiting to see how the battle played out.

I first heard a loud popping sound.

Then the sound of something breaking.

The enemy spears broke one after another, like countless wooden chopsticks.

The row of the demon army had collided with Team Bloodstone and Team Andalusite.

Immediately after they came in contact, I saw barriers being put up in addition to the buffs from the hymn. Ogres possessed inhuman strength, but their spears broke against our powerful defenses, sending broken shards flying everywhere. Some people got stabbed in the shoulder and suffered other minor wounds, but Team Bloodstone stepped forward mostly unscathed.

They marched in unison, and as they reached the enemy shield wall, a dull thud rang out in the battlefield.

The shields were two meters in height, and they were too tall for even an adult to jump over. The sight of the seemingly unbreakable wall looming over them must have been quite intimidating. And yet, they didn't falter. The soldiers shouted their war cries, and they actually seemed to be overwhelming the enemy with their own intensity.

"Go! Drive them back! Show them that Arilai doesn't back down!" Their voices carried over the sound of clashing iron on iron. The fire in their hearts burned stronger as they shouted, and the enemy shields began to creak.

Despite most of their spears having been broken, the demon army must have accounted for this, as they replenished their offenses. The monsters raised more spears and brought them down to pierce through the barrier from above.

"Team Andalusite! Shields! Forward!"

"Rahhh!!!"

Team Andalusite immediately raised shields above the unit from behind. They still had the defensive barrier too. They had effectively turned into a makeshift fortress, and it was hard to believe they had adapted to the enemy's attacks without discussing this beforehand. Their teamwork was perfect. Maybe it was because their leaders would be getting married... No, those two had always

been in sync.

The men pressed forward to break through the enemy shields, and their backup provided powerful support from the rear. Our raid team's tight-knit coordination was one thing, but the fact that we had gone in to disrupt the enemy's back line may have helped with pushing back the shield wall.

The power struggle between the humans and ogres was practically even, but when the men were able to push forward a step, they increased their ferocity even further.

One of the big shields tipped over, and Zera took that moment to slide in and stab through the opening. He attacked the darkness beyond with savage thrusts, and black blood pooled onto the floor. A bestial scream filled the air, and a demonic figure crumbled on the other side. But unfortunately, the hole in their defenses was immediately filled, and the chance was gone.

The back-and-forth exchanges were just beginning, and it would be an endless war of attrition from here.

I was still hanging from my sword in the wall, staring in wonder at the scene unfolding beneath me.

It had been a while since I'd seen two armies clashing like this. Even though it seemed like it was just a game of numbers and brute strength, there was a lot of thought and intent behind their formations. I was completely drawn in by the dramatic battle.

"Man, this is intense. You can't find this kind of action even in movies."

"I wish I could see it too. The enemy in the back hasn't moved yet, right?" Marie's cute voice spoke into my ear. I stared into the distance to check, and the giant monster was still there. An infernal aura flickered in and out around Borax Doudou, seemingly in sync with its breathing, but it hadn't moved a step from its original position.

"I don't know why, but he still seems calm for now. Oh, and the monsters have spellcasters among them, and they look like they might be making a move soon."

"What? How do you know that?" Eve said, butting into our conversation via

Chat. She was in a different party from ours, but I had said the last part out loud, so she had responded to my voice.

“I may not look like it, but I’ve fought in a war before. I’ve spent a whole day watching one with some bento too. Let’s see...” It could be difficult to grasp the situation on a chaotic battlefield. In these cases, it was better to get a blurry-eyed look at the entire picture, then further break down their movements from there.

“That group is supporting their advance from the back. Can you see that they’re providing backup whenever their defenses start to fall, and those guys near the center are preparing to fill in the gaps?”

“I dunno... I guess it kinda looks that way when you point it out. Maybe I should have learned this stuff too,” Eve replied.

“I don’t know too much either. It’s just stuff I kinda picked up... Hm?”

My eyes were drawn to some sort of fluid that began to drip down to my fingers. The wall glistened with the black coating, seemingly from an unidentified viscous material. I rubbed it between my fingers and sniffed it.

“Smells acrid... What is this? Kind of smells like tar... Oh, Eve, you shouldn’t lick that!”

“Don’t worry, only the strongest of poisons will have any effect on me. I can tell by the smell that it’s not that bad.” With that, Eve spit to the side.

“Hm? This isn’t poison or oil. No idea what it is.”

“Hm, I wonder. I haven’t seen anything like this on the third floor so far.”

“Hah, hah, those are magic elements known as demon matter. You could even call it a relic of negativity that has been passed down from ancient times.”

A voice entered our Chat out of the blue, and Eve and I looked at each other in surprise. Could Wridra even enter Eve’s Mind Link Chat too? Though, if she could break into ours, it would stand to reason that she could do the same thing to others.

“I think you mentioned something about that before. Something about the collapse of demon matter from ancient times.”

“Yes, though it is rare to see it so defiled in such an enclosed space like this. It has no immediate negative effects on the human body, but you may end up being something other than human if you spend a week or so in here.” We groaned, and Eve spit a few more times. We obviously had no plans to stay here long term, so that was probably her way of putting our minds at ease. But it seemed Wridra had trouble understanding why we found the stuff psychologically repulsive.

This demon matter seemed to be dripping down from above. Judging from Wridra’s earlier comment, it didn’t seem to be something that organically appeared in nature. So then, who could have coated the walls with this stuff? And why?

I heard what sounded like snapping trees and snapped back to reality. The clash between the front lines had advanced a step further. The raid team had repelled the spears coming down on them from above with multiple barriers and destroyed them at the same time.

“We’re driving the pile through! Puseri of Team Diamond, charge down the center!” Doula shouted the order the instant the enemy’s heavy infantry took a step back. Our defensive squad was already waiting for the order, and they split off to either side to make room for soldiers to charge forth from the center.

Clad in twilight armor, a puff of icy air was expelled from Puseri’s mouth as she led the charge. Her helmet had what looked like a ponytail sticking out of the back, and she was equipped with a full-body shield and a large spear in hand. Those who had seen her usual demeanor were taken aback by the sight. She usually seemed like a high-maintenance yet magnanimous noble woman, but she had the aura of a battle-hardened warrior on the battlefield.

Her spear could strike fear into the hearts of any man or monster. Her very presence was different from the others. One could instinctually tell that those who stood in her path would perish. There was a primal fear that came with that knowledge.

A shadowy horse emerged from the ground, and as the twilight woman mounted it, the air of death surrounding her grew ever more potent. The sharp scent of that death filled the air, and the horse’s hoof lit a spark as it dashed

forward.

The enemies stacked two, then three shields as the horse's thunderous gallops grew closer. But the effort was akin to standing before a dump truck. The deceptively powerful charge bent the thick iron shields, and black blood sprayed into the air.

Crash!!!

The charge violently broke through the demon army's second and third layers of defenses, and a nearby group of spellcasters preparing a spell also ended up getting wiped out. The ogres gathered up with weapons in hand in order to stop the black horse, but countless arrows came flying to pierce them through their heads.

It was Cassey Pilaw. She was a member of Team Diamond with peach-colored hair and eyes, and ears with characteristics of some sort of variant species. She clung to the wall with the claws of her feet, unleashing waves of arrows from her heavy bow with unbelievable speed. It was almost as if she could read into the future. They landed into the monsters' heads as if drawn there by magnets, eliminating the threats to Puseri before they could even reach her.

"We have an opening! Cut them down, men!" Doula wasn't one to miss such an opportunity. She made her way into the wide opening with Team Diamond's fearsome offensive line. They spread out to either side, cutting down the immobile shield wall from their flanks.

We were still clinging to the wall, watching the show from above. I would have clapped if one of my hands wasn't full.

"Wow, that was really well done. They drove back that wall that looked nearly invincible," I said.

"Yeah, even we can't stop Puseri once she gets in ass-kicking mode. Wait, is that one getting closer to Puseri? The one with the different-colored fur..." Maybe Eve was getting used to assessing the battlefield too. I looked to see what she was talking about and knew immediately that this was bad.

The creature was lanky in contrast to the ogres, and it hunched forward as it wove through the battlefield like an assassin. There were spikes growing out of

its body, and it cut down any speeding arrows with the blades in each hand. It also used other monsters as shields to evade attacks as it advanced, and I realized there were several of them creeping up like shadows. The black horse had ended up completely surrounded, turning in place as it pounded the ground with its hooves, leaving an open spot in the middle of the enemy's army.

"Marie, I'm going in to help Puseri. How are your preparations going?"

"I have two structures ready to go. I was thinking of preparing a third one while we had the advantage, but it looks like we won't have time for that. I'll secure an escape route first." She knew what I was going to ask her before I even said it. I let out a sigh of relief knowing she was staying levelheaded, then pulled my Astroblade out of the wall covered in demon matter.

But just as all eyes were back on the battle, a strange splashing sound caught my attention. It had come from directly behind Marie, out of the pitch black wall. Who could have noticed that sound, like a small fish hopping out of the water?

The figure emerged from the wall, and its eyes gradually opened.

It was "Demon Arms" Kartina. She slowly awakened within the room that had been prepared just for her.

§

The black material dripping down the walls was known as demon matter.

It had existed since ancient times and was a remnant of powerful magic that was used back then. Due to the hint of magic stored within, it completely blocked off magical detection within the room, and it gave Kartina the ability to travel freely through the matter.

The ancient armor known as Demon Arms granted its wearer unfathomable power. It increased Kartina's level by more than twice the original number and turned her into something more than a monster by fusing with her very bones.

At the same time, her human emotions had all but vanished. However, her humanity was merely a byproduct of having spent time in distant lands after being banished from here. It didn't take long for her to realize it was unneeded.

After all, she could now tear through steel with her bare hands and move as fast as the speed of sound. All she had to think about now was fulfilling her duty.

Her mission was to eradicate the intruders. As her first step toward accomplishing her goal, she had chosen the elven Spirit Sorceress as her target.

Now was the perfect opportunity, with everyone's attention focused on the battlefield.

The man in the control room watched them, thinking that they were running around like fools even though the entire battle had been set up to serve as a distraction. He then gave the order. He already knew the result that would follow.

"Now, Kartina." Kartina received the order through Mind Link Chat and rose out of the wall. Her nails extended into sharp blades, and her eyes lit up with a platinum glow.

She would execute the mission perfectly. It wasn't that she was too confident in herself; it was merely a fact. Perhaps destiny would have been a better way to describe it.

The sound like a fish splashing in water may have been too subtle to mark the end of a life. Upon emerging from the wall, Kartina immediately accelerated to breakneck speed. Her target wouldn't even hear her coming.

Thud, slam! The next second, a powerful impact shot through Kartina's body.



She should have no longer felt any pain, yet the blow was so forceful that it made her spit demon matter out of her mouth. All she could remember was her mind going completely blank.

A gust blew by, and the elf's white hair danced in the wind. She had been fully focused on channeling her magic a moment ago, but she opened her amethyst eyes and turned around. There, Kartina was crawling with her hands on the ground.

Kartina's target was right there in front of her. But she couldn't move an inch. With her perceptual domain expanded to its limit, she had come to realize what had happened.

That black-haired woman had punched her.

The realization made her vision blur. How could that woman have touched her when she was moving so quickly? In fact, her arm should have been blown away just from the impact.

But the black-haired woman just smiled unconcernedly. Her beauty sent a chill down Kartina's spine. How could she smile as if she was simply greeting a guest? The woman parted her lips and made a nonsensical comment.

"Have you heard this phrase before? 'He who rules with his left rules the world.'"

"Huh?"

It really made no sense. According to the memories left by her perception signals, that woman had hit her with her right fist. More importantly, how could that have been a punch? She looked down at herself to find black fluid leaking out of the cracks in her Demon Arms. It was hard to believe such damage could have been dealt with a bare fist.

Kartina felt a primal fear at the sound of wind swishing nearby. She flinched, then rose to a half-sitting position to find the black-haired beauty swinging her fists to the left and right, her grin widening.

"I have been quite into so-called 'foreign martial arts' lately. Hm, you will do just fine as a training dummy. Not too hard, not too soft... Perfect for punching.

I have also been feeling a bit stressed as of late. I suppose this will be a good opportunity to fulfill my role as a tank.”

But that was far from what a tank would do. No tank would lash out their arms like whips, hitting their seemingly out-of-reach target with brutal force.

Kartina couldn't believe her eyes as her armor chipped away from the impact of every heavy punch into her sides. Alarms went off in her mind like agonized screams, and she staggered backward. Her strong sense of duty kept her from fleeing. In addition, she couldn't let that horrifying ritual she had endured be for nothing. But as a fist sank into her face and blood spurted from her nose, she felt like she would break out into a sweat despite her sweat glands no longer being functional.

What is this woman? Who the hell does she think she is, fighting me unarmed like this?!

Kartina endured the flurry of blows and put up her guard to forcefully close the distance between her and her opponent. Normally, she would have leaped at the woman from outside of her attack range and sliced her with razor-sharp claws.

She should have had a massive power advantage. So why was she the only one getting her skull hammered in by those fists like battering rams? Why was her head getting rocked by those relentless punches?

“Ah, that one landed. It seems to have dazed you.”

Kartina gritted her teeth as the elf woman turned her attention back to the battlefield, as if the black-haired woman had this situation covered. That look on her face said she wasn't the least bit concerned for her safety, and Kartina's vision went red with rage.

The same went for that blonde woman with her eyes covered. Not only was she unafraid, but she brought out some sort of picture book and began drawing with a pen. However, Kartina had an inexplicably ominous feeling about this. Just like when she had gained the Demon Arms, she felt the fear of permanent change being forced upon her.

Despite having lost the ability to sweat, cold sweat erupted from Kartina's

pores as she howled in terror.

Booooooom!

If she had been asked when the worst day of her life was, she absolutely would have said today. It was truly awful in every way. The more she struggled, the more fatal wounds she endured, and the cracks finally reached her core. Her eyes had turned blazing red as she released her full power, but it was futile.

What level is this woman?! And why aren't you using your left hook? It's supposed to rule the world, right? When are you going to use it?! Just as her confusion reached its peak, a voice spoke into her mind through Chat.

“Enough. Retreat, Kartina. Repair your damages.” That woman was insufferable. Even as Kartina took to the air to flee, she simply turned her attention back to the battle. “Demon Arms” Kartina disappeared into the wall covered in demon matter, her murderous rage smoldering inside her.

At that moment, a big change was happening on the battlefield.

§

“G...ggr... GROAAAAAARRR!”

The sudden, ground-shaking scream came from Borlax Doudou, which had been silently waiting in the center until now. Something dark and sharp sprang up and pierced the creature from below, draining blood into the ground.

The monster clawed at its head and writhed in pain. Cracks formed from the tip of its right arm, then shattered up from the elbow. I watched with wide eyes as magma-like blood sprayed everywhere, incinerating the ogres that were near its feet.

“Looks like it's getting its life force drained,” I muttered as I watched from afar, but I couldn't just stay idle for long. Well, that wasn't entirely true. The assassin-like monsters in front of me were probably around level 75, and I had already memorized most of their attack patterns. I could automatically dodge a majority of their attacks thanks to my skill, so I decided to keep an eye on the mid boss while taking care of the assassins after Puseri.

The two blades spun around in circles, but they merely served as distractions,

so I didn't pay them much mind. The monster was wearing a hood deep over its eyes with its dirty teeth bared. With its long arms and skillful handling of its sabers, it would take me a long time to defeat this one.

"Not that I've beaten you quite yet!" I swung my blade down toward the monster's shoulder, and the assassin attempted to block it with its own weapon. The opponent was about the same level as me, but my weapon was far more powerful. My sword dug into the creature's shoulder, and it screamed out in pain.

"Hehe, I'll take that!"

Please, help yourself. Eve leaped forth from behind me, slid across my sword and flashed her dagger. She cut clean through the monster's neck, spraying black blood into the air.

"All right, got a tough one! Been a while since I leveled up!"

"Then you can have this one too."

"Really? You sure? I feel kinda bad, like I made you give it up. But if you insist..."

The final assassin already had its tendons cut, and it was sweating profusely as it pictured its own terrible fate. But unfortunately, both the monster's and my predictions ended up being wrong. A black horse suddenly appeared from the assassin's flank and trampled its head, crushing it like a melon. It all happened in an instant, and Eve was left frozen in place.

"Heeey!"

"There is no need to be so dramatic, Eve. We are in the same party, so our experience is shared evenly." The rider opened the cover of their helm, revealing Puseri's sweat-soaked face. It seemed she'd succeeded in breaking through the monsters that had surrounded her. Relieved, I looked to the distance to see Gaston cutting the remaining two enemies in half. That old man was a level 120 beast himself, after all. Though, he didn't even seem close to his limit so far.

"Hello, Puseri. I was able to avoid getting surrounded thanks to you wreaking havoc on your horse."

“No, I am the one who was saved by you. This was far too much to be considered repayment for a night’s lodging and a meal. Oh, this corpse...” Puseri said from atop her horse, and I followed her gaze to the corpse and was taken aback.

The monster’s corpse gradually shrank as black fluid oozed out from it.

“Wait, could they be...”

“The rebels we heard about in the reports?” Eve finished. Could these monsters be what had become of those rebels? If the fluid leaking out of them was demon matter, their very beings could have been transformed the way Wridra had mentioned.

The changes sweeping over the battlefield were just beginning.

“*Grrrooooooaaarr!!!*” Borlax Doudou unleashed a titanic roar, breaking the floor underfoot with a single stomp.

Standing on its head was an unfamiliar figure. Clad in black plating, the tall figure of a monster had a somewhat feminine air to it. The monster’s two eyes glowed with a murderous, infernal flame. A black tube connected the two monsters together. It seemed to me that the feminine one was absorbing life force from Borlax Doudou to repair itself.

Then came another unexpected change.

Wet, grotesque noises could be heard as something rose from the ground. It was the assassin monster from earlier. The three of us watched, dumbfounded. But it didn’t end there. The corpses scattered across the battlefield began to rise, one by one. We watched blankly as they moved unnaturally to return to the battlefield, despite the fact that many of them were missing limbs.

When I looked more closely, I noticed the demon matter dripping from the walls was spreading across the floor. Judging by the way it was flowing into the dead bodies, it seemed the matter was what was controlling the corpses. I was standing there in shock when I heard Wridra’s voice in my mind.

“I hear they call her ‘Demon Arms’ Kartina. She is the one leading the monsters. I shall go pay a visit to the one who put on this distasteful show. I leave the rest to you, Shirley.” Could Shirley really guard Marie in Wridra’s

stead? I was a bit surprised that the Arkdragon entrusted the task to her. Furthermore, I had to wonder what she meant about “the one who put on this distasteful show.”

As I remained bewildered, an order was shouted across the field.

“All units! Retreat! Run back to the defense point!” I didn’t have time to ask Wridra for details in the middle of this retreat. We sprinted across the battlefield along with Puseri and her horse, heading toward the defensive perimeter that Marie had set up.

If those rebels had turned completely into monsters, maybe that Kartina woman also... I turned around with that thought in mind, then saw her spread her black wings.

What could have happened to make her eyes burn with such hatred?

§

“Impossible! We far outclass them in levels!” Angry shouting could be heard in the dim room, followed by the sound of a fist slamming against a desk.

The visibly irate man rubbed his stubble, then exhaled slowly in an attempt to calm down.

“Yes, it’s time for a different approach. Instead of going after the elf, I’ll force them to retreat by eliminating half of their soldiers.” That meant he had to give out the orders and create a new army. He couldn’t afford to panic. It was hard to believe what he had seen in the footage earlier, but it was time to change directions to a method that was sure to succeed. The man muttered as if to reassure himself.

No matter how many times he replayed it in his mind, he still couldn’t believe what he had seen in the video.

He had assumed the intruders would be completely wiped out by the ancient Demon Arms he had obtained. It was the whole reason he had rebuilt the hall and monsters and had set up a trap for his enemies. But the results had been completely different from his expectations. Kartina had only ended up suffering heavy damage from punches and was forced to retreat. He had ordered her to quickly repair the damages, but it was unlikely that her core would be fully

repaired.

Just who was that black-haired woman in the footage? A feeling of dread crept up inside of him when he saw that she was staring directly at him.

“She must have noticed the Magic Tool for surveillance. Hmph. She’s a sharp one, I’ll give her that.” She was beautiful and enticing as well. Strangely, he couldn’t take his eyes off of her. But what was that gesture she was doing? The woman raised her hand into the air, as if reaching straight for him.

He rubbed his eyebrows as he stared.

It wasn’t that she was waving or provoking him. Her fingertip appeared blurry in the footage, with it being out of focus.

The man’s fingers were still on his eyebrows when they froze in place. There was something wrong with the footage. It looked as if a blot of darkness was seeping out from the woman’s finger and spreading out from the monitor.

“What the...?” The man touched the terminal for no particular reason. His brows furrowed when he realized it was viscous to the touch.

“I don’t remember it being this dirty... Wait, that smell...” The odor irritated the back of his nose. It smelled like the tar that was produced when burning charcoal.

The man’s eyes suddenly shot wide open, and he shouted.

“D-Demon matter!!!” Then, it appeared. A mass of demon matter in the same shape as the woman’s finger extended out of the display.

The man stood up instinctively, knocking his chair over in the process. He swallowed his fearful scream, then swiftly drew his sword and slashed his target in one motion.

Cling! The sound of shattered steel rang out loud and clear. It was the sound one would hear if someone had grabbed the blade between their fingers without moving an inch. A shock ran through the man’s hands, as if he had swung his sword at an unmoving boulder. His sword had been broken in half.

Arms extended from the display and grabbed on to either side of it, and then a body pushed itself out all the way. It was as if something had been born from

tar. Even after witnessing such an unbelievable event, he still couldn't take his eyes off of the woman.

"Uncanny witch. What sort of beast are you?"

"Oh? But I would ask you the same question. You are the one who has transformed your allies into monsters." She plopped down onto the table. Sure enough, it was the black-haired woman from earlier. The demon matter all over her body had slid right off, and she looked exactly as she had in the footage from before.

The man had a spare weapon on him, but he figured it would be useless. Seeing her face-to-face like this, he realized this woman was on a completely different level.

She smiled bewitchingly, but the ice in her eyes sent a shiver down his spine.

"I can see you are a descendant of the keepers of old, but oh, how I despise you. You have damned your own comrades and turned them into monsters while you sit here safely, surviving without a care in the world."

"No, I have no intention of doing something so foolish. It would be pointless for me to survive alone." The man was slightly shaken by the mention of the keepers, but reached into his inside pocket. What he brought out wasn't a weapon, but a syringe. It was full of some sort of silver, glowing fluid, but the Arkdragon was capable of identifying its contents.

It was highly purified demon matter.

It was likely extracted from a fiend-class monster, and one drop of it was enough to kill the average human. One's very soul and consciousness would be engulfed, turning them into a wild, uncontrollable monster.

It was far more dangerous than the material that had been put into Kartina, and the man should have perished upon injecting it into his own neck, but he endured it with his willpower of steel. It would have been far easier to give in to death.

He tore through his clothes as his body swelled up, but he managed to keep it under control while unleashing the demonic power to its full potential. Had it been a different time, he would have carved his name into history.

His arms glowed like morions, and they cracked the floor with a heavy thud. Wridra watched with pity as countless tails grew out of the man's back and pierced through the terminals in the room.

There was no going back for him now. This applied to that Kartina woman too.

Wridra sat and waited until the man got his transformation fully under control, then quietly parted her crimson lips.

"What is your name, descendant of keepers?"

"I need not pass down my name. I'm nothing but a vestige of a man who dreamed of ancient days." He cracked his neck, and the fight had begun.

The woman's foot kicked off of the ground.

Her heavily armored dress had been tattered, revealing a sliver of beautiful skin on her thighs. Wridra held the hem of her dress to keep it out of the way as she walked through the door and went outside.

It would have been disrespectful to turn around. The man had put his body and soul into the battle, and she only had to gaze upon his dying face but once.

"The vestige of a man who dreamed of ancient days... Then I suppose he would know not of the Arkdragon who had remained neutral through those times." There was a hint of sadness in her voice, but it faded away without reaching anyone's ears.

A large hole had been left in the room, and only the man's upper half was left next to the window.

§

Fsssh...

The ground rumbled in a wide area as Mariabelle's three-dimensional structure was constructed. The L-shaped fortress she had positioned in the corner of the room was attempting to extend about three stories high.

At the same time, square-shaped obstacles rose up from the ground while leaving an open path along the raid team's escape route. It was about one meter in height and didn't seem like it would be very effective in stopping pursuers. I watched this all unfold as I ran.

It would have been much easier to just teleport instead of running, but with Puseri riding her horse and Eve sprinting along, I couldn't bring myself to just say "See ya!" and leave them behind. This was probably the salaryman in me speaking. Though, I had no problem going home before my colleagues after work hours.

"So this is what you meant by securing an escape route earlier. Would I be right to assume it explodes too?"

"Of course. Hehe, I used Double Incantation, and its power is amplified further by trapping them in between. I'm using some grumpy Fire Lizards too, so whatever you do, make sure you don't kick them." She didn't have to tell me twice. It must have been something else if Marie was boasting about it.

I turned around to see the enemy had split into two parties. One was running at full speed to chase after the retreating raid party, while the other was slowly going into a defensive formation.

"Huh, I thought they would be too angry to care about defense." Large, shadowy shields were created from the demon matter, and the massive ogres picked them up one by one. It seemed they were replenishing weapons like spears too.

I had thought they would come at us in full force, but they were surprisingly calm. Considering the enemy was bolstering their defenses, perhaps that monster known as "Demon Arms" Kartina still needed time to recover. I wondered if the cracks all over her body had been inflicted by our tank Wridra.

Such thoughts occupied my mind as I continued running toward the exit that opened before me.

As the horde of ogres entered the perimeter Mariabelle had set up, things became...messy. We had baited them about halfway in when a firestorm erupted to take them all out at once.

The impact and deafening sounds of explosions behind us sent us into a near panic.

"Ahhh! Puseri, Puseri! Lemme on your horse too! No, no, no, don't leave meee!" Eve shouted.

“Whoa, this is just like a war movie! Maybe watching them with her wasn’t such a good idea!” The heat blast from behind singed my skin, but I had no intention of turning around. I couldn’t see the monsters getting caught in the explosion, which made their screams all the more terrifying as my mind filled in the blanks.

Our own allies were also running around screaming with their heads in their hands. This may have been the scariest moment during this fight so far.

Puseri, Eve, and I screamed our lungs out as we ran into the three-dimensional structure Marie had built. Luckily, no one on our side got injured.

§

Doula’s heels clicked against the floor as she took long strides down the dark, narrow corridor.

Her red hair billowed like fire, and those who were resting there quickly gave way when they saw the intensity on her face.

Mariabelle’s structure was a massive, three-story building. Yet, there were almost fifty people inside at once, and with some of them firing off arrows and magic at the enemies, it was quite hectic, as one might imagine.

Doula didn’t give the men a word of encouragement as she passed by. In fact, she didn’t even seem to notice them as she continued walking with an austere expression. Those who were on break couldn’t help but stare at her intimidating appearance. They wondered why she wore such a severe expression when they had hardly experienced any casualties so far.

Indeed, the casualties for this battle, and on the third floor in general, had been at a record low. The raid team consisting of four different teams was powerful, but the low number of casualties was the most impressive part of this entire ordeal.

One of the reasons for this was the change in Doula’s Team Andalusite. Their team had nearly gotten wiped out in the past. They had learned from that experience and trained their holy powers to prepare themselves against monsters in the future. They would protect their allies with multiple barriers and heal the wounded to keep their casualties to a minimum. Doula had been

training and learning how to efficiently lead her troops, and things were finally clicking into place during their time on the third floor.

Then it happened.

They had arrived at a somewhat spacious room, and Doula's rage reached a boiling point when she saw what awaited her. Her red hair faintly stood on end, and her wide eyes scanned the room.

She gulped audibly, unable to process what she was seeing.

There were about five injured on the ground. Their teammates desperately tried to heal their wounds, but the agonized groans of the injured filled the room. Black blood flowed from their wounds, and even their veins were black and bulging from their skin, as if the infection was worsening before her eyes.

"Captain! It's no good, the wound won't close..." Those in critical condition thrashed about, and it was clear to see they didn't have much time left. They very well could end up with more than one casualty. Zera, who had been talking to the other team members until now, gestured for Doula to join him.

"Look, that black stuff is even in their eyes. If we don't do something, they could end up turning into monsters."

"Hold them down for me, I'll channel my life force into them so they can fight back."

It was a powerful poison... No, something worse. The only explanation she could think of was that they had been stabbed with those black spears during that clash earlier. She'd had a bad feeling about them, but she didn't realize just how dangerous those weapons were.

Feeling frustrated and angry, she placed a hand on an injured man's muscular chest. The man gripped her wrist with his own pale hand.

"No... Please don't. I-It's too late for me. You can't afford to waste energy on me when the battle's not over."

"Be quiet and sleep, Loki. I won't let you turn into a monster."

"Then, I ask that you cut my neck with your sword. Please..." Doula's anger grew further.

Having been inflicted with a fatal disease, Loki's suggestion was a sensible one. A holy woman couldn't do much to combat unknown illnesses. The man would likely meet a terrible end before having a chance to heal.

But even as his warrior's body was defiled, his burning spirit compelled him to keep fighting. And so, Doula let her frustration get the better of her and lashed out upon noticing the people who entered the room.

"Mariabelle, Shirley, stand back! This could be contagious!" The elf girl was visibly shaken and instinctively squeezed the other woman's hand. Doula's voice reverberated in the confined space, making her all the more intimidating. Shirley seemed troubled and looked back and forth between the other two. She then moved her lips closer to Marie's ear and whispered something.

Despite being clearly scared, Marie looked at Doula with her purple eyes.

"This disease is supposedly caused by something called demon matter in the victim's body. If you try to heal them, it will affect the demon matter and speed up their infestation."

"Ah?! Everyone, stop your healing! How do you know that?" Mariabelle and Shirley looked at each other, as though they were unsure how to answer. After a moment passed, the elf girl nodded. It was as if she was telling the other girl it was all right to reveal some sort of secret.

And so, Shirley slowly stepped forward.

Shirley was an ancient being that knew demons very well. As she removed her embroidered blindfold, the soldiers who had been prepared to accept their death looked up at her, their eyes wide.

Shirley had changed her appearance a bit. The outline of her body was slightly blurred, and her sky blue eyes framed by long eyelashes were now fully bared. Doula moved out of her way without thinking, and Shirley touched the fallen soldier's wound with the tip of her pale finger.

Mariabelle had heard that Shirley's role was to facilitate the cycle of life and death. That was why the second-floor hall had been reborn into a verdant landscape. But this was the moment Marie truly understood what that meant. She stared in shock as Shirley pressed her lightly colored lips against the dark,

tainted wound.

Blood poured out of the wound, but Shirley didn't seem to mind. Demon matter, the source of the tainted blood, soon flowed into Shirley's mouth as if it was being purified. She gulped it down her pale throat, leaving only a fresh, red wound.

"How is this possible...?! She didn't even use the power of the gods!"

That wasn't entirely accurate. Shirley was basically a goddess-in-training herself. Having been released from the ancient labyrinth that bound her, one could at least say that she was a being opposite of demons now. Yet, no one here seemed to realize that.

Everyone, including Doula, stared in disbelief at the fantastic sight before them. But the healed man felt the power of her presence most intensely, and tears fell down his face as he was overwhelmed with an inexplicable emotion.

What is this? he thought.

He couldn't put a finger on the feeling that continued to well up inside of him.

The sensation of her lips pressing against his chest without regard for getting tainted was one he would never forget. It was warm like sunlight, and it felt as though golden life force was flowing into his body. There was a refreshing sensation to it, like looking up into the skies of Arilai under a tree's shade. Perhaps it was her sky blue eyes.

The sensation sank deep into the soldier's chest, and she mouthed, "Get well," after draining the impurities that were once thought to be incurable. He wanted to get to know her. He wanted to be close to her. If possible, he wanted to pledge his fealty to her and serve her with undying loyalty as if she was a queen.

"Lady...Shirley..." Shirley's brows furrowed to form an adorable, confused expression, but there were many other seriously sick people to tend to. The soldier tried to give Shirley a respectful kiss to the back of her hand, but Doula stopped him with a punch.

Five lives were saved that day. The men who were saved would later start the strange custom of serving Shirley as her personal guards, but that wouldn't

happen until a later date.

§

I couldn't help but let out a "Whoa" in surprise. The structure Marie had made this time was on a much larger scale than usual. It seemed the extra time she had taken on it had paid off. There was now an L-shaped, three-dimensional structure in the room, and a stone staircase had been placed inside right next to the entrance.

The first floor simply served as a layer of protection. Just like with castles, it was much more effective to defend a spot from a higher position. Marie must have decided on this design after analyzing the enemy's size and features.

The ceiling was low, and it was narrow enough that we had to avoid running into other members when multiple people were inside. It had clearly been made with durability over habitability in mind.

"There are three floors of this? You really get better and better by the day, Marie."

"I'm impressed that she managed to make something of this size all by herself. Our sorcerers are still having issues trying to figure out how she possesses so much magical energy," Puseri said as she removed her helmet and turned around. Her twilight hair cascaded down, a few beads of sweat glistening on her face. She wiped them away with her hand, then smiled.

I couldn't really tell her that Marie was being supported by an Arkdragon that could generate magic just by breathing. But the good thing about Marie was that she always tried to use her head to find the most efficient solutions without relying on magical prowess alone.

"However, the ability to rest within enemy territory is extremely useful. Team Diamond would gladly welcome another sorceress in our ranks." It seemed her passionate recruitment was still ongoing. I just wanted to have fun without any responsibilities weighing me down, so I had no intention of joining another team. Besides, if we were to merge teams, we would need to change our residence to Arilai too. Though, come to think of it, I wouldn't be so opposed to moving there now compared to how I had felt before.

I thought about the reason for this as I climbed the stairs.

I realized it was because I had a lot more friends now compared to a few months ago. I had been traveling alone for nearly twenty years, but my life had changed drastically since meeting Marie. I was close with many more people in both worlds, and my environment was changing at a rapid pace. Strangely, I found this quite comforting. But now wasn't exactly the best time to think about this, so I decided to save it for later.

I told her we would think about her offer, and Puseri and Eve waved goodbye and left. Team Diamond then noticed the two returning, and embraced Puseri while saying things like "Lady Puseri!" and "That was a beautiful charge!"

I had been worried about them before, but it seemed they got along just fine now. It was kind of a relief to see.

I started climbing the stairs after Puseri and the others, then noticed a girl descending the stairs one step at a time. She was holding the hem of her robe and slowly came into view...

"Ka-zu-hi-ro-san." The adorable voice came from Mariabelle, who was holding a plastic bottle. Shirley was with her as well.

Marie hopped off of the last step, and the lovable elf girl filled my vision.

I instinctively caught the drink she passed me, noticing how cold it was. I then noticed the jellyfish floating next to her.

"Looks like the ice spirit is putting in work in this world too. I didn't think I'd get to have some chilled juice in a place like this. Actually, I think our very own Ms. Elf deserves the most credit."

"Oh, I don't know. I was just waiting here while you all did the work. I was getting worried that all of the enemies would be defeated before this stronghold would get any use." I had actually been worried about that too. Though, even if that did happen, it would have been fun to see Marie puff out her cheeks and sulk.

I removed the lid of the bottle and poured the clear liquid down my throat. There was a gentle peach flavor to it, and I narrowed my eyes at its moderate sweetness. It seemed my grip strength was weak from that short battle, so I

was grateful to get some rest here.

“Whew, cold and tasty. But man, I need to work on my stamina a bit.”

“Hm? You’re just now realizing this?” I turned to the source of the gruff voice to see an old man with graying hair coming down the stairs. Marie turned too, then hid behind me. She would have been fine with Gaston normally, but there was a murderous aura still lingering over him due to the fight not too long ago.

Seeing him up close like this, I saw that he was just as tall as Zera, but he was more toned in build. Although his hairline was beginning to slightly recede, he still seemed to be in the prime of his physical abilities. Gaston raised an eyebrow and shot me a look.

“Your lack of stamina is a problem, but so is your lack of consideration. You dive into trouble headfirst, so you had me sweating just watching you. I was worried you’d get yourself killed sooner or later.” I couldn’t tell him that I did, in fact, die rather often.

After a moment passed with no reply from my side, Gaston made a face, then climbed up the stairs and told me to follow. I looked at Marie and the others in confusion, then decided to go up the stairs after him.

The corridor was narrow, and it was rather hot from all the arrows and magic being fired off from here. But we had our trusty jellyfish cooling the air, so it didn’t really bother us. It floated in the air ahead of us, and Gaston poked the ice spirit with a fingertip, seeming to enjoy the refreshing coolness.

“So. If you want, I could whip you into shape. This goes for that Puseri girl too, but it’s hard to watch you lot nearly kill yourselves in front of my eyes.”

“You seem pretty reckless yourself in my eyes... N-Never mind!” I took back my words when he shot me a glare. He was strangely intimidating for someone his age. But he seemed rather kind considering he was worried about us. As I thought about it, Gaston placed his hand on the stone wall and turned around.

“You’re the one who defeated Zarish, aren’t you?”

“Nngk...” I choked a bit.

“Heh,” he chuckled, seemingly satisfied that my reaction had confirmed his

suspicion. The wrinkles in the corners of his eyes deepened and he looked at me.

“I heard he’s captured at the castle. I was glad about it at first, thinking he’d finally shown his true colors. But something doesn’t feel right. He’s not the type to go out and confess his wrongdoings.”

“Well, I suppose you’re right,” I said noncommittally as I slowly climbed the stairs.

“So when I saw you fight, it made me think. Maybe you could take on Zarish. There aren’t a lot of people who could beat him other than me.” A bead of cold sweat ran down my face. Maybe it was the wisdom of his years, or maybe he was just very perceptive in general.

“I’m surprised. You’re quite sharp, Gaston.”

“Ha ha, well, anyone could put two and two together when they see that you’re close with Eve after being enemies. Everyone around you seems to be pretty thickheaded though.” He grinned. Gaston now knew that I was the one who defeated Zarish. I figured he wouldn’t go around telling everyone, though it wasn’t as if I would mind if he did.

It seemed that was all he wanted to say, and the rather quirky old man walked away.

When I arrived at the upper floor, I saw that the other soldiers were there.

They were firing off arrows and magic through the small windows there, and when I peeked out, I saw that the enemy forces were marching toward us with shield walls up.

Many of the ogres were dark in appearance, and they had formed circles to advance toward us. But with our L-shaped building and projectiles raining on them from above, they had to deal with attacks from the flank as they moved closer to our position.

“Meanwhile, our forces get to take turns resting. Looks like we have those ogres under control.” If it came down to it, Marie could use her magic to set off her spirits like land mines. She could basically farm experience without any risk at all.

That meant we just had to deal with that so-called Demon Arms. She seemed to be absorbing life force from that giant for now, but we had no idea when she would make her move. It was probably better for us to move quickly.

“That ‘Demon Arms’ Kartina, was it? How did that monster get so damaged? Was it Wridra?”

“Yes, I was too preoccupied to watch for long, but Wridra was punching her to a pulp. You should tell her later that that isn’t the tank’s role.”

Wait, did she really give the boss a beatdown with her bare fists? I thought with wide eyes, and I saw Shirley making punching gestures behind Marie’s back. It seemed Wridra really did have a fist fight, and the thought made me dizzy.

So, even she wasn’t impervious to Japan’s bad influences. But she did protect Marie just as she said she would, so I had nothing to complain about.

Speaking of Wridra, she said she would “pay a visit to the one who put on this distasteful show” and hadn’t returned since. Shirley had been watching over Marie in her stead, so I figured she would be safe.

“Hmm, I see. Then maybe I’ll try making a move. It’s been a while since I fought a strong enemy, so I’m looking forward to it.”

“Goodness, you always get like this. I don’t mind if you go, but...” Marie looked around to make sure the other soldiers weren’t listening, then whispered into my ear. Her pretty voice spoke through her smooth lips, tickling my ears.

“It would be a pain to deal with if someone sees you die here. So be sure to come back, even if you get badly injured. I’m sure Shirley and Doula will patch you up.”

“Will do.” I didn’t realize Shirley could heal people too. Though, she controlled the cycle of life and death, so it made sense.

“Also, you’ll be off for Obon starting today, right? We’ll need to celebrate and make some boxed meals once we get back. Let’s go shopping at the supermarket together.”

“Okay, got it.”

Marie furrowed her brows, then whispered some more.

“And this is important, but I hear there’s another typhoon coming. Do you think the Banana Wani Park in Izu will be okay in the rain? The alligators there won’t go home if they get wet, will they?”

“I think it’ll be okay. Wridra said we’ll be fine too.”

“Are you sure?” Marie asked with her eyes, and I gave her a reassuring look back. She was in a good mood after that, so it seemed I was good to go to face off with Kartina.

I brought out a turquoise Magic Stone from my inner pocket and tossed it out the window. The creature that emerged with a loud whirring noise was a strange, winged monster called Roon.

“Now I can fly right over the enemy army. Okay, I’ll be going now.”

“Take care!” And so, I set out to the battlefield again with a rather lighthearted attitude.

I would soon get to know the cursed Magic Tool left by the ancients.

How exciting.

I flew across the room on Roon’s back and felt a murderous aura that seemed to shake the very air as I progressed forward. It was obviously coming from that “Demon Arms” Kartina. The monster was clad in black armor, but I was pretty sure it was a woman seeing it from a distance. Despite being about two meters tall, there was a femininity to her bone structure.

Faced with her murderous rage, I felt like I was in the middle of an icy field. I was only about a hundred meters away, but Roon’s flight speed was much slower than usual. It must have been afraid of the monsters that clearly outranked it.

I felt myself tremble with excitement. No, maybe half of it was from fear. I exhaled quietly, realizing it was the first time I had felt this way in a long time.

The enormous creature at her feet was far bigger than the ogres and was likely the original boss here. But now, its upper half had mostly crumbled away.

Its very existence would be consumed by Kartina, leaving nothing behind.

As I observed the target, Roon made a noise to alert me.

Roon, roon.

“Yeah, she noticed us. I wonder how close we can get before... Whoa!” My footing shook and my vision spun around. I felt like I was going down a roller coaster moving in a spiral, then hurriedly looked to the side to see Roon was missing one of its wings entirely. I glanced back to where Kartina was and saw that she had disappeared.

“What?! We’re being attacked already? So fast!” I didn’t want the Magic Stone to be shattered completely. I placed both feet on Roon as we spun around and ordered it to return just as I teleported. The stone pavement that was about ten meters away appeared right in front of me.

I had teleported to a new location, but I wasn’t in the clear yet. The momentum from the spin still applied to my body, so I softened the impact of the landing using my body like a spring and rolled on the ground, then stood up.

Oh, I can’t drop the Magic Stone. I chopped off an approaching ogre’s head, then cut cleanly through another and caught the turquoise stone in my hand.

“Ah... There’s a crack in it. I’ll have to bring it to Mewi later.” Mewi the Neko was our go-to whenever we needed help with Magic Stones.

As I put the stone in my inner pocket, my enemy was already behind my back.

Something black and inhuman, emitting such intimidating pressure that I couldn’t bring myself to turn around.

My heart beat frantically in my chest.

But to be honest, I loved these moments.

“It’s kind of like when someone invites you to meet them behind the school building. Your heart’s beating because you don’t know who’s waiting for you. What about you, ‘Demon Arms’ Kartina? How do you feel right now?”

I shouldn’t have turned around. There were cracks extending from her chest that split her right down the middle, and the expression on her was separated to the right and left sides, making her look deformed.

She was about two meters in height, which was about average for a monster. The armor covering her entire body glinted sharply like morion, and even someone as dull as me felt fear as she glared at me with those wings growing out of her back. Afterimages appeared on either side of her, and a moment later, sparks flew from my Astroblade. I had to admit, I was pretty proud of how quickly I had drawn my sword.

And yet, I wasn't quite fast enough.

I didn't even have time to click my tongue in frustration as I was sent spinning backward from the impact.

The muscles in my upper arms made disturbing noises as they bulged and strained. If my feet hadn't luckily touched the ground to let me teleport away, I likely would have died right then and there. I heard an odd *Vwoosh!* in my ear, then I disappeared and reappeared somewhere out of the enemy blade's reach.

I could only land in places within my field of view. I landed on a wall on the far side, then Kartina slowly turned to me from a distance. Her eyes were slightly bloodshot, and I could hear strange gurgling noises coming from her mouth.

I let myself descend from the wall, keeping my eyes on my opponent the entire time.

One blink, and I could end up dead. I felt a rush throughout my body. They say the body will desperately fight to survive when it senses imminent death. Even though this was a dream—no, another world, my body knew. I had to live through this. I had to fight to survive.

My eyes shot open, and by some miracle, I managed to dodge the attack coming for me a moment before I landed. My Acceleration was fully active, but Kartina was still so fast that she appeared to be a blur.

Remember those sharp claws. Replay that moment in your mind. Carve it into your memory. This trajectory, this power, speed, the movements of her muscles. Remember them perfectly, down to every minute detail. My brain was on overdrive as I focused to my maximum capacity, and my first slot was filled.

My Overload skill could parallel process multiple things at a time. It was once called Reprise, but it had evolved by merging with Over the Road.

If I could utilize it to its full potential...

An ominous noise made my hair stand on end. My opponent arched back like a willow tree, then swung forward with claws like five swords, causing blood to splatter from my cheek.

The wall behind me was sliced up like tofu, but I had no time to pay it much mind. I had to memorize this terrifying attack as soon as possible if I hoped to move forward. The enemy was far stronger than me, but I had to win somehow.

A powerful kick was driven deep into my stomach. I activated Acceleration at the moment of impact, memorizing the speed and power of this attack into my second slot. I had reduced the damage by leaping backward as I was hit, but it was strong enough to take a good chunk out of my health.

I grounded both of my feet as I was sent flying backward, skidding to a halt across several dozen meters. The monster seemed to realize something was off and decided not to follow up with another attack.

It seemed she had noticed. If I was her, I would have been creeped out too. I stared with my sleepy-looking eyes, observing. Slowly but surely, I was adapting to her offense.

“Hey there. Can you hear me, Kartina? Then why don’t we talk for a bit? Otherwise, one of us could die in a few more minutes.” That may have come out more provocative than I intended. I had meant to say that I could be the one who would end up dead.

“I may look weak in your eyes, but I’m level 77. What level are you?”

Kartina wasn’t having it. She extended her wings backward and leaped at me to attack even faster than before. If she had been turned into a monster against her will, I wanted to see if there was any way to save her. Still, it was possible that she was listening to what I had to say. Perhaps it was possible to talk my way out of this.

I really didn’t have much time to think about it.

She was so fast I could barely see her.

The moment I thought she had disappeared, she broke the sound barrier and

made the upper half of my body vanish. The attack was too fast for me to memorize with Overload. After all, I couldn't even see it.

"Hm?!" But it was Kartina who ended up being shocked. She did a double take at the sight of my lower half also vanishing like mist.

I watched her reaction from behind, relieved to find that the illusion I had created with Phantom Image was effective for dodging her attacks.

"My appearance and level may not be all that impressive, but I can hold my own."

I swung my blade at her side from behind to see how she would respond, but she turned around with superhuman reactions, sparks flying from her claws as she blocked the blow in a split second. But I wasn't going to let that deter me.

The black sword in my hand glimmered like a shooting star and made a whirring sound. Kartina immediately changed her stance, slouching forward slightly and shifting the trajectory of my blade with the back of her hand.

The Demon Arms was terrifyingly fast indeed. But as far as I could tell, it needed to charge up slightly before going off. There was no stopping her charge if I gave her a moment to breathe. I mean, I did manage to stop her earlier, but I thought that maybe I could turn the tables if I kept fighting her at an extremely close range.

Clang! Clash! Crack!

I swung Astroblade in a flurry of blows, pale blue sparks flying into the air each time we collided. It seemed like the demon matter was burning up, but there was no telling for certain. I didn't have the time to check. My vision changed completely with each second that ticked by.

My attacks were fairly straightforward swings of the sword. I executed the motion immediately after teleporting clockwise around her. I repeated this move with less than a second of an interval between each hit. I left an afterimage behind as I continued my assault, and Kartina crouched down further as she raised her claws to fend off my attacks. She looked pretty cramped in that position, but her reflexes were still insanely quick. She blocked, parried, dodged, and read my attacks, then cut my cheek with her sharp claw.

I hadn't expected to come out of this unscathed. Things weren't exactly going as planned either. My usual game plan was to switch to more complicated attack patterns once the enemy got used to my simple ones. But Kartina was adapting to my attacks far quicker than I had imagined.

I was able to dodge her claws as they came for my forehead, but my counterattack ended up being a complete failure. Kartina spun around like a top, ducked under my swing, then kicked me right on the side of my head. My attacks came to a halt. My breathing was disrupted.

The way I had run out of patience really showed how much I still had to learn. Haste makes waste, as they say. As I was sent spinning toward the ground, a black leg covered in what looked like morion came crashing into me. I managed to put my sword in front of my stomach to block, but the impact was driven into my body, and I was sent flying upward at an angle.

"Gah!" My body slammed into a stone pillar, and I got the wind knocked out of me. Just as I was about to go into free fall, I saw Demon Arms flying toward me. This was bad. I was beaten with a flurry of blows, not even allowed to land on the ground. It seemed she knew that I couldn't teleport unless I touched the ground with both feet.

I tried to use my sword to dodge the incoming attacks as I was embedded into the stone pillar, but I knew I wouldn't last much longer. Every hit landed with a heavy thud, and the faint light of hope began to disappear when I realized the enemy wasn't even out of breath.

Boooooom!

Well, that was loud. Broken shards of stone dug into my body, and I could no longer tell if I was evading or getting hit by her attacks. The noises around me were so loud that my hearing had gone numb. I still struggled desperately, but could see in my dim vision that Kartina's fist had now formed a knife hand. She was preparing to deal the finishing blow.

I'm sorry, Marie. I know I promised I wouldn't die. I'm about to lose, but I hope you can distract everyone away from me somehow. Then I'll go right back to sleep and come back.

As the thought ran through my mind, the last thing I expected was for a shield

to appear from the ground and protect me. I heard something hard clash against something, and saw that Kartina's claws had stopped a few centimeters away from me. Her hand had penetrated the shield about halfway through, but failed to finish me off.

"Ngh?!"

No, no. That wasn't my skill.

The unfamiliar sight—or rather, maybe it was because her killing blow was interrupted—anyway, Kartina was sent into a blind rage and started pummeling the egg-white shield. But that wasn't the only shield. More appeared from the ground, one after another. I watched blankly as they began pushing her away from me.

"Is this...?" I slid down and hit the ground, but I didn't even have the energy to teleport away. I couldn't move as I breathed heavily, then noticed someone gently holding on to my shoulders. It was a woman's hand, and I was surprised by the scent of a flowery, elegant fragrance.

"Is that...Shirley?" I must have gotten a cut on my forehead, because my vision was filled with blood. I was having trouble moving, but it seemed my guess was correct. As my body slid down, I was placed in a position so my head rested on her lap. Right before me were those sky blue eyes. Her bright colored hair danced before my face, and her serene expression appeared upside down in my eyes.

Her lips mouthed, "Are you okay?" but honestly, I wasn't. The shields from earlier were getting chipped away, but I didn't even have the vitality to run.

Shirley tilted her head as if to say, "Well, this is troubling," but all I could do was agree. She then gestured as if to say, "Please stay still." Her slender finger touched my chin, and I was drawn in... After that, I felt myself overlapping with her thighs.

I didn't understand what had happened, but it was like I had become half-buried inside of her. She then exhaled warm air over me from directly above.

In that moment, I felt a splendid, almost golden wave of life force flowing into me.

Somehow, it reminded me of a vacation. It was like a moment in time where you could just enjoy yourself without having to worry about reality.

It was as though I was walking under the refreshing blue sky, and then I'd touched the golden ear of a rice plant with my fingertip. I felt the blessing with all five of my senses, and I closed my eyes dreamily and let myself take in the sensation.

And when I opened my eyes, I was surprised to find that my wounds had all healed. I sat straight up, but Shirley wrapped her arms delicately around me as if to say, "Just a little longer," and put me back down onto her lap.

She was her usual self as she put a finger to my lips with a shushing gesture. She was so gentle and calm that I nearly forgot we were in the middle of a battle.

It sure was strange being coddled like this on a battlefield. Just then, I realized something. As I laid there, I felt warmth spreading through me, down to my fingertips.

I almost wanted to rub my cheeks against the smooth thighs supporting my head. A soft, comfortable feeling came over me, and my eyelids grew heavy. I mean, I wasn't going to fall asleep or anything. Kartina was still going berserk right next to us, angrily whaling at the shields impeding her path.

But somehow, the space around me felt serene. It must have been because of Shirley's distinct charm. The gentle air around us smelled faintly of flowers, and I felt like I was resting in our room on the second floor.

Meanwhile, Shirley stroked my hair, which was making me feel ticklish. It seemed she wanted to tell me that my wounds were healed, but I still had to recover my energy. I could feel her heartbeat, and my body gradually regained its strength.

"Well, I've definitely never been healed like this before. Thanks, Shirley. I'd love to get treated by you again some time." I looked up at the upside-down Shirley and gave her my honest thanks. Her hand stopped in the middle of patting my head, and her sky blue eyes widened. She then turned away slightly and laughed.

It was hard to believe she was the second-floor master. She was simply a goddess, I thought to myself like an idiot. But she looked at me again as if she was itching for another compliment, and I reconsidered, thinking maybe she was an angel rather than a goddess.

“I’ve never seen anyone heal so quickly before. And you didn’t even have to speak an incantation. I’m proud to be the leader of Team Amethyst with someone as skilled as you with us.” Shirley shook her head side to side as if she was embarrassed, but she must have been quite flattered, because she started rubbing my shoulders.

Whoa, that feels really good.

As she worked the knots out of my shoulders, I felt my body getting gradually warmer. The mental scale in my mind was going back and forth between goddess and angel. It leaned toward goddess, then her cuteness favored the angel side, and the pointless evaluation went on.

“Oh, that’s right. If you’re here, does that mean Wridra is back safely?” It seemed she was. Shirley nodded, then pointed at the stronghold in the distance. I couldn’t actually see it from here, but I was relieved by Shirley’s response. I was worried about Wridra after she had left us without much explanation. Though, the Arkdragon probably would have scoffed if I told her so. Or maybe she would have smiled. I wasn’t sure.

“Then I can’t just sit here and do nothing. So, Shirley, what’s your preferred method of fighting? Could you tell me what other abilities you have?” I glanced to the side to see that her shields had nearly been broken. Although, they were clearly no ordinary shields, considering they held off Kartina’s attacks for so long.

Come to think of it, those shields looked somewhat familiar. As I tried to recall, Shirley undid the string around her book. I felt like a child having a bedtime story read to me, but I decided not to put too much thought into it.

It seemed the pictures had been drawn with colored pencils or something. The book was full of colorful drawings, most of which were hand drawn by Shirley. Meanwhile, some pages just had names written in the ancient language. My eyes were drawn to a particular entry.

“Wait, is that...an ogre?” Right after I asked, a white monster emerged from the ground. Seeing the muscular creature stand there with a large shield in hand, it finally clicked for me.

“Oh, I get it. You can turn the enemies you defeat into your allies. I thought you’d been drawing in your picture diary or something...”

Shirley cocked her head as if to say, “What’s the difference?”

It occurred to me that maybe the reason the enemies hadn’t been respawning was thanks to her. That explained why things had been going so smoothly on this floor. It was drastically easier to handle when we didn’t have to worry about enemies sneaking up on us from behind.

Shirley touched her book, and then something hopped up onto her finger. It looked like a white lizard, and it shot me a mean look. Shirley’s finger then pointed at the word “Egriny” spelled in the ancient language.

“Oh, I remember you, Egriny. This party is a bit loud, but I’ll at least guarantee good food. Looking forward to working with you.” I moved my finger closer, and Egriny seemed to think for a moment before play-biting it as a form of greeting. He then turned around and hopped back into the book.

“That’s impressive. I’m really curious to know how it works. I’ve never seen such a wondrous book before. I guess Monster Book is kind of an apt name for it after all.” Shirley then hugged her book like it was a precious treasure and smiled, making me smile along with her. I considered myself pretty mild mannered, but I was no match for Shirley.

Now, it was time for me to get back into action. I stood up, and Shirley swatted at the dirt on my back and butt for me. Just then, Kartina broke through the ogre’s defenses.

“Rrroooooooooarrr!”

Having fulfilled its duty, the ogre broke down into particles and withdrew back into the book. My view then cleared up, revealing the raging “Demon Arms” Kartina standing before us. She seemed surprised by the fact that my wounds had been healed, but I was taken aback by the sudden change in temperature myself. It was as if winter had suddenly arrived.

“Hmm, would you prefer a one-on-one instead? We can stop if you want. What do you say?”

“Graaaaaarrr!!!”

Oh, she's charging right at us. It seemed there was no room for discussion. I wondered when our opponent would notice that a hoard of those jellyfish I loved so much were floating all around her.

The moment her claw touched one of the spirits, it released a blast of frigid air. The ice spirit encased her arm with ice from her wrist to her elbow, and Kartina leaped backward as soon as she noticed. The thing was, there was another jellyfish right behind her.

Kartina looked bewildered as she was hit in the back with consecutive ice blasts. This was the power of a Spirit Sorceress: a preemptive attack that had been prepared beforehand.

Well, I did ask if she preferred a one-on-one. Since she didn't seem to mind, it shouldn't have mattered whether it was a two-on-one or three-on-one, right?

“Don't forget, we can communicate using Chat. I may still be a newbie, but not as much as you, Kartina.”

She easily broke the ice around her arm, but seemed to have trouble getting rid of the ice encasing her wings. She could probably have broken that too if she spent some time doing so, but I wasn't going to let the chance Marie gave me slip by. No, I wouldn't call this unfair. This was a co-op effort.

“Thanks, Marie. I'd appreciate it if you could keep blocking off her surroundings. By the way, will I be okay if I touch the spirits?”

“Yes, of course. But since I'm controlling so many spirits at once, I won't be able to trap her with stone walls like usual. The ice spirits are also limited to simple movements only.”

“I figured that'd be the case,” I replied in Chat. The enemy could move at abnormally fast speeds, so it would have been difficult to trap her with stone walls or send ice spirits at her anyway. That was why it was better to have many of them surrounding the opponent instead.

Eeeeeee...

The moment I drew my blade from its sheath, a sound like a horse's whinny rang out. Astroblade began greedily draining my energy, and Shirley summoned guardian shields from the ground. The white shield wall surrounded us in a circle.

Hmm, it's pretty cramped in here.

It was about the same size as a boxing ring.

"Round two, fight... Well, that sounded a bit better in my head. Okay, Kartina, let's start on the count of... Whoa!" Kartina charged forward with explosive rage. She looked terrifyingly intense, but her speed was reduced due to her wings being restricted. Though, a normal person would have still died instantly.

My view changed completely as I pretty much automatically appeared next to Kartina. Astroblade glinted, and those infernal eyes turned toward me.

I had an opening. I had to stay focused. My opponent was much faster than me; I had to take this slow and steady. That's what I had learned from my earlier mistake.

Kartina sliced through my illusion, and I flew forward from behind it as it dispersed. My sword glowed like a shooting star and was drawn to the enemy's black palm, clashing against it with a metallic clang.

It completely halted my momentum, and she threw a front kick at me as I stumbled a step forward. The attack was so swift it could have ruptured my organs had it landed, but I had already registered that move into one of my slots. The counterattack I had set allowed me to teleport to her flank in a split second and slash at her Achilles tendon at the same time.

Clang! Finally.

I had finally carved a cut into that crystalline armor.

Kartina lost her balance after I cut halfway into her ankle, but spun around to deliver a backhand blow with her claws. I thought she'd managed to shave off some of my hair, but then I noticed blood coming out of my split cheek.

"Hm. I thought I dodged it, but she extended her range by spreading her

fingers.” I adjusted the attack pattern I had memorized and increased the speed of my attacks.

Earlier, I had just been using my illusions, teleporting short distances, and hoping it worked out. But I decided to change my approach. By optimizing every move I made, I would be able to precisely evade and attack at the same time.

I deftly dodged each attack while backing away from my opponent. It was obviously an attempt at provoking her. I could see her blood boiling with each swing that hit only air.

“Grrraaaaaarrr!!!”

Heh, how scary. Her roar from up close was enough to make an innocent child faint. But I was far from actually being a kid, so I gave the horrifying Demon Arms a creepy smile in return.

“Kartina, it seems like you and I have similar tastes. Now, it’s time to fight. A runt like me may not be the powerful opponent you hoped for, but it’ll be fun in its own way. You’ll see.”

I had a tendency to mouth off like this. It wasn’t that I did it just to mock the opponent; I was enjoying this tense battle to the fullest. Kartina glared at me and hurriedly repaired her ankle, but did she really think she had time to do that right now? I landed on Kartina’s stomach. It all happened in a flash. Teleportation happened in an instant, so there was no way for an opponent to react to it. My enemy was startled by my sudden appearance, and I flashed her a grin. Though, the smile may not have been exactly fitting for a child’s face.

“Hey there, you seem to be struggling. If your foot isn’t working, I’ll just approach you like this.”

Her face contorted demonically as if she wanted to scream, “Silence, insect!” If that was really what she was thinking, then she must not have noticed my glowing sword. It was rather unfortunate that she was so myopic, simplistic, and monotonous. I had hoped she would be the ideal foe I dreamed of.

My glimmering sword had been charging energy since the fight started. It glowed far brighter now, and it could likely fire a blast straight through that solid armor.

“ROOOOOOAAAAAR!!!”

An X-shaped slash instantly appeared in the spot I had just been standing in. It seemed Kartina finally realized the trouble she was in and foolishly charged right at me.

Kartina, if you're a speed-type fighter like me, you can never lose your cool like that. Otherwise, your attacks will become simple, making them easy to predict like earlier.

A jellyfish appeared right in front of her eyes. The spirit had white frost floating around it, and it was clearly the same kind from earlier. They looked cute in our eyes, but Kartina probably didn't feel the same way.

Kartina stumbled as she tried to stop, but she couldn't avoid my full-force swing. I watched as she weakly swung her claws...

Fwsh! Clang!

I had put my whole body into the swing.

The counter swing landed perfectly into her helmet, sending black fragments flying into the air. Kartina's knees went weak, and she spread out her legs to stop in place.

Her labored breathing and the sight before me stopped me from delivering a follow-up attack. Astroblade's starry glow faded away.

“Kartina...”

The half-broken helm revealed a tear-soaked, emaciated woman's face.

Her eyes had their whites and blacks reversed, a trademark characteristic of demons. They looked rather big for her face, but that may have been because her cheeks were so hollow.

Her hair was soaked in sweat. I could see the exposed parts of her had turned brown, and even black in the deeper parts, because of the Demon Arms's influence. Her teary, demonic eyes weren't looking at me, but somewhere far away.



“I’m...the only one left... Why?! Why did this happen, Captain? Please, answer me... Captain!!!”

I was at a complete loss for words. Before my eyes wasn’t the enemy I had imagined in my head, but a woman that couldn’t stop crying.

“I see. The rebels were turned into monsters. So you’re the last...”

“We are not rebels! I...I have a duty to stop Arilai, even if it costs me my life... Raaahhh!” Kartina suddenly accelerated, but I already knew how to fight her. Tons of ice spirits appeared when I teleported backward, and she had to desperately evade them as she tried to hit me.

But to be honest, I felt bad for her. I couldn’t bear to watch as she cried while she repeatedly attempted her futile attacks, sustaining injuries all around her body as she did so. Kartina cut her cheek on a broken fragment of her armor, and when she opened her eyes, an ice spirit was right in front of her face.

“Ah!” And so, I picked up the ice spirit that was about to touch Kartina. It was as cold as ice, and the ice spirit wriggled in my hand in an attempt to get free.

When I moved it aside, I saw the woman’s freckled face and her brown hair. She was covered in ice, and with her joints having been disabled, she had lost her ability to function. I whispered to her from right up close to her face.

“Kartina. I’m not from Arilai. That’s why I don’t know too much about its history.”

“Don’t give me that. You defile the sacred ancient labyrinth, you piece of filth. May my ancestors curse you for all eternity.” Her burning rage was palpable. There was a militaristic intensity to her, but she wasn’t so intimidating if she couldn’t even beat a single kid.

Then, for some reason, Kartina twitched.

It seemed Kartina was just as confused as I was, and she restlessly looked down all around her body. Her Demon Arms was squirming against her will...

It wanted to flee. That’s how it seemed in our eyes.

Then, I finally realized that Shirley was walking up from behind. But there was no hostility about her, as if she was just going on an evening stroll. Shirley

extended her finger, and the gesture was enough to make the Demon Arms tremble in fear. Kartina screamed, desperation in her eyes. Not at us, but at her own armor.

“D-Don’t run! No, no, I said NO! You do *this* to my body, and now you want to run away, you bastard?!”

It was like they were playing tug-of-war. Kartina clung to the ground with all fours, and her armor tried to get as far away from Shirley as possible. I heard something ripping, and I was shocked when the armor peeled away from her body, revealing bare skin.

The Demon Arms extended like rubber, and Kartina’s well-built upper body was exposed. But she didn’t allow the armor to escape. She gripped the ground with her claws, grabbed the armor that tried to remove itself, and pulled with all her might. It was clear that she would do whatever it took to keep it from running away.

“Hnng, nnngh! Do not...run away...from me. You want to run away from a kid that was just playing around on a lap pillow?! Don’t you fucking dare, Demon Arms!!!” She had put her very soul into that scream, but Shirley and I exchanged blank looks.

I mean, maybe it seemed that way to Kartina, but that was necessary for me to heal.

I asked Shirley to confirm, but she looked away from me in response.

Wait, what does that mean? It was necessary for me to lie on your lap, right? It wasn’t? But then, I remembered something.

She had once told me she had the ability to put defeated monsters into her book. Once the monster was stored in the book, it was likely that their will and very being would be changed. Maybe that was why the armor instinctively tried to flee from Shirley.

This was a battle for their own existence. Kartina, who would rather die than flee from this fight, and the Demon Arms, which didn’t want to perish.

The struggle would soon come to an end. The Demon Arms seemed to have given up and returned to its original position with a high-pitched whirring noise.

It was like a dog that had been ordered by its master. The hole-ridden, beaten armor covered up Kartina's sweaty body. Just then, someone calling to us from afar suddenly appeared.

"Ah, so you were able to make it obey through force. Then perhaps there is still a way."

"Huh? You're here, Wridra?" A black stain expanded on a nearby wall, and a black-haired beauty stepped out. She then reached behind herself and picked a certain elf girl up in her arms.

I turned around, and...the ogres in the distance had already been taken care of. Though, I figured Marie probably could have wiped them all out whenever she wanted.

Wridra stepped forward. She parted her lips and continued where she had left off earlier.

"Did your captain ever tell you what happens to those who succumb to demonic powers?" Having depleted all her energy, Kartina struggled to breathe as she looked up on all fours with a confused expression. She then shook her head as if she had given up. Wridra let out a heavy sigh.

"You will not die. This is rather unfortunate for you. Your shattered body will become whole again, turning into something else entirely, and you will continue to attack any intruders that enter this place. You do know what respawning is, do you not? That will be your fate." Kartina gulped with a shocked expression on her face. It seemed she didn't know whether she should feel hope or despair from those words. Unfortunately, it would be the latter.

"Your organic parts will mostly die, and your consciousness will become completely muddled. Do you wish to be permanently trapped in this labyrinth in such a state?" It was clear from the look in Wridra's eyes that she was only speaking the truth.

Kartina began to tremble. The realization had finally hit her. She was doomed to live eternally, unable to escape from this ancient labyrinth. She must have felt it all the more clearly now that she was on the brink of death.

"However, you are quite lucky indeed. Even I had given up already." With

that, the Arkdragon placed a hand on Kartina's cheek. There was such kindness in her touch, it was hard to believe they had just been fighting earlier.

But come to think of it, it did kind of make sense. Wridra had lived since ancient times, and she had seen many involved with demonic powers until now. Maybe that was why she was able to touch her with such kindness.

Wridra stared at Kartina's eyes, swollen with tears, then nodded.

"Yes, you have the Demon Arms well under control. Shirley here is the one who controls the cycle of life and death. Therefore, you can choose what you wish to become. You may die, go on to your next life, or be released from this labyrinth and live on in this world. Though, you will have the life expectancy of a normal human, of course."

Kartina probably wouldn't have been convinced if they were just ordinary words. But as she felt Wridra's warmth while the Arkdragon put her arms around her neck like an old friend, she felt tears fall uncontrollably from her eyes. Fighting all alone in this labyrinth forever would be far too cold. Kartina looked around at the room littered with the corpses of her former comrades and spoke with tears still streaming from her face.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry... Have mercy. I can't fight anymore. My will to fight is no more. I'm sorry, everyone... Curse me if you wish..." Kartina opened her mouth wide and cried out loud.

It was a strange sight.

Kartina clasped her hands together as if she was praying to God, and Shirley laid a hand upon her head. There was something sacred about the way the darkness covering her body faded away.

The dust that remained from the fallen monsters scattered into the air as the third floor burned. Marie and I watched while holding each other's hand as even those remnants were purified like white snow.

When we reported that the Demon Arms had been defeated, cheers erupted from the stronghold. As the troops stepped out of the fortress, they stared in silence at the room that seemingly became covered in snow.

It was as if it was snowing in celebration of their victory, and it in fact marked

the release of monsters that had been working for thousands of years. The white landscape was the final destination of those who had fought on for so, so long. Knowing this, the two of us didn't celebrate, but watched hand in hand as everything turned white.

Unbeknownst to us, the same thing was happening at the central control room.

The keeper who had fought through to the end and had his lower body turned to dust faintly opened his eyes and looked up at the light of salvation. The light was being emitted by the one who had been in the water tank, who then stepped through the glass and touched the man's forehead. The man eventually broke down into particles and mouthed the words "I'm sorry" before vanishing completely.

Shirley was probably unlike any other being in the labyrinth.

She could put an end to the circulation of demons and could reveal paths that weren't possible before.

One day, she just may change this ancient labyrinth entirely. But the way she opened her Monster Book and proudly showed off her new illustration made her look rather childlike in my eyes.

Kartina stood up, clad in pure white armor. From the look in her eyes, whatever sorrow had been haunting her was now gone...but I didn't understand why she glared at me as if to say, "You'll pay for this."

§

Citizens were coming and going as usual while soldiers solidified the castle's defenses.

The sun had gone down, but the discussion going around the roundtable hadn't reached a conclusion yet. One of the members of the royal family, Wallace, stared at the map upon the table and grunted.

"It's only a matter of time until the ancient labyrinth of the oasis falls." Although Hakam and the others were still in the middle of their raid, there was no voice of dissent from the table. Now that the most powerful monsters of the third floor had been captured, its fall was practically guaranteed. The map on

the table showed the estimated enemy forces, most of which were focused on the west side.

“Unfortunately, we’re not able to contact the team there due to something interfering with our link. But it has already been ten days or so. It’s possible that our communications aren’t being blocked, but there’s no one left to answer our calls. The good thing is this won’t hurt us too badly, considering we reduced the number of raid team members to a minimum... Oh, pardon me. I forgot your son was among them, General Gido.” He turned his cold eyes toward a well-built man.

The man in question was the master of the Thousand household and Zera’s father. There was a powerful air about him despite his graying hair. Just as his name suggested, he had the ability to control a thousand blades at once, and he could turn the tide of any battle no matter the situation.

“My son chose to fight on that battlefield. I have nothing to say on the matter.” There was neither anger nor sorrow in his words. Death could be awaiting anyone who steps into battle. That was the message that the man’s quiet demeanor was conveying. As they were about to return to their discussion, the master of the Thousand household spoke again.

“My son may still be inexperienced, but his sense of smell is as good as mine. And I hear that ‘Man-eater Barracuda’ Gaston is part of the raid team as well. I cannot imagine that beast of a man would actually die.” Several at the table nodded at this comment.

Gaston had come to choose more dangerous battlefields as he aged, but always returned without sustaining any damage. Even Gaston himself had complained, “When will I get to die?”

Wallace scoffed.

“Impossible. According to the records, there is a powerful weapon from the ancient times known as the Demon Arms inside. While I will admit those men are quite skilled, should you not be more realistic about this, General? You should beware not to lose your position by being so narrow-sighted.”

“It appears you’re thinking *too* realistically, Prince Wallace. As general, I will prioritize my own intuition. I believe the ones who determine the state of a

battlefield should be those who have actually fought on one.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” the prince replied, but his smile didn’t reach his eyes. Not many knew that these two had been clashing quite often. That was part of the reason why the discussion dragged on, and many of those seated were getting visibly tired. Some of them blatantly let out a sigh as Prince Wallace approached the general to confront him.

“But perhaps it’s that way of thinking that has been leading our young soldiers to their deaths? I find it inhuman that someone would send their own son to a fight he has no hope of winning and order him to resolve this unprecedented situation.”

“That is the nature of battle. If we gave in to hardship, this country would have been swallowed in sand long ago. They took on the challenge believing they had a way to win. To fight is to entrust oneself to hope, Your Royal Highness.”

“Hah, if you wish to rely on hope, then why don’t you go to the church and worship the land god? Or perhaps you should clasp your hands together and pray to a shooting star at night.”

“Pardon me, but such places with no enemy in sight are not the kind of battlefield I know.”

“Well, I think doing so would make you seem more like a parent.”

Neither of them had any intention of backing down, and the royals gathered there looked up at the ceiling as if they were sick of it. As they lamented the thought of wasting more time today, the door to the room slammed open.

“I-I have a message from the third-floor raid team! They’ve successfully defeated the Demon Arms and Gedovar’s forces!” The messenger’s voice reverberated through the room. There was a faint silence before they all rose as if they had been jolted with electricity.

“What?!” The one who was most surprised was Prince Wallace, who had supposedly been assessing the situation realistically.

This news implied that the raid team had turned the situation around despite facing the horde of monsters living on the third floor, including their elite units,

while being outnumbered and outleveled. The records showed that the Demon Arms was a terrifying being that could take down castles all on their own.

Their surprise was understandable. But only the master of the Thousand household let out a “Hmph” and slowly walked toward the table.

“Now we can finally have a proper discussion. The enemy vanguard, our biggest threat, has now been wiped out. Their country is likely more surprised than we are.” He smiled for the first time since stepping into the room. It wasn’t the smile of a fighter, but the smile of someone who was enjoying the situation. Now that things had changed so drastically, it was unlikely that any of the royals gathered would get any rest until the morning.

§

It was already past noon by the time we got back to the condo. I wasn’t sure if it was because she had used too much magic or because she had been concentrating for so long, but Marie was splayed out on the bed and didn’t move. When I looked at her, she returned my glance with a displeased expression.

“Are you okay, Marie?”

“I’m tired. I’ll have you know, no one would ever control so many spirits at once under normal circumstances. You should understand that it was only possible because I was the one doing it.” She thrust out her lips and made a sullen expression, which I found adorable.

I moved closer, and she reached out her hands as if demanding a hug. I reluctantly supported her by her back and under her knees and picked her up like a princess... Well, okay, I was happy to do it.

She was incredibly light. Yet, she was so soft, and when she wrapped her arms around my neck, I knew the upcoming Obon vacation would be an amazing one.

When I turned around, I saw Wridra rolling her eyes at the table. It seemed she had really taken a liking to reading the newspaper with glasses on. She straightened out the pages and moved the paper into the sunlight.

“So, Kartina didn’t perish after all.”

“Yes, I hear she will be serving Shirley for some time. Supposedly, it would be better for her to stay in that world at least until she witnesses the fate of the ancient labyrinth and her own country.”

That would be something she would care about. Although she was a precious source of information on the enemy country, I couldn't bring myself to interrogate her. I had heard she was forced into the Demon Arms, so it was probably better for her to rest for a while.

“Oh, something smells nice. What's cooking?” Marie asked.

“Pancakes. We should eat up before we head out.” The elf and dragon both loved pancakes covered in butter and honey. Marie swung her feet happily as she waited and called out to the cook right as she flipped the frying pan.

“Thanks, Shirley. You're such a good cook!” It seemed Shirley had gotten used to Japan for the most part. She turned around and gave a thumbs up, and I was having trouble believing she was a former floor master. It was good that she had gained the ability to negate her transparency after a part of her seal had been undone the other day. But apparently, she turned blurry whenever she let her guard down, and it startled me whenever it happened.

“We'll be leaving tomorrow, so we'll need to get ready. There's something called character bento in Japan, where they arrange the ingredients of a boxed lunch to look like certain characters.” Marie's long ears stood up. It seemed something immediately came to mind from my comment. Marie's purple eyes were alight with excitement when she looked at me.

“But...isn't that for children? You should know that I'm far more mature than you might think.”

“Not at all, this is a part of adult culture. Kids don't really make their own bento.” The practice had started spreading overseas as well. There was something strange about the culture of enjoying food to the fullest. Though, if anything, I thought being carried like a princess was more childish.

“Is that so? Mhm... Then, I suppose if you insist, we could give it a try. I'll let you have this one and take this chance to learn about foreign culture.”

“Yeah, I've been living in this country for a long time. You should listen to

people who have more experience about these things. So, what kind of character would you like?” I asked, and Marie whispered something in my ear. It kind of tickled as she spoke, but I was even more amused when I pictured the character she mentioned. It was a rather obvious choice.

I knew it was hard for a person to forget the first anime they ever saw. Just as I pictured the character’s smiling face, the pancakes finished cooking. All we had to do now was move the Monster Book away from the table and... Wait, Monster Book?

This thing can’t activate its powers even in Japan... Can it?

There were probably countless monsters sealed within those pages, but... It couldn’t have been. There was no way. Yet, when I looked at the book, I thought I saw a picture of “Demon Arms” Kartina, posed with an ogre shield and spear.

I must have imagined it. I shut the book, and pancakes on their respective plates were soon brought to the table.

“Ah, they are done,” Wridra said as she folded her newspaper. Our humble breakfast in the wake of an intense battle was about to begin.

I had Marie sit in a chair, guided Shirley to the table, and opted to have a manly standing breakfast. I looked up at the summer skies thinking that I really needed to buy extra chairs soon.

And so, our Obon break and trip to Izu were both about to start.

The freshly made pancakes were warm and sweet, and the smell of butter filled the room. I thought that the flavor felt nostalgic for some reason as I ate.

Chapter of Midsummer, Episode 13: Izu Trip

Four o'clock in the morning...

That was what appeared on the clock's display when I pressed the button.

I let out a sleepy yawn. Marie and Wridra were, of course, still sleeping. They seemed rather comfortable as they breathed lightly in their sleep. I moved their limbs off of me without holding back, and the two girls rolled over onto their stomachs.

It seemed they would be sleeping for a while longer, and I still had a lot of preparation to do. I decided to let them sleep in for a bit and rubbed my eyes as I woke up.

I walked barefoot down the dark corridor, then picked up the remote and turned on the TV. The light from the screen lit up its surroundings, and the weather newscaster flashed a bright smile despite it being so early in the morning.

"Hm, so the typhoon veered off far to the east. Wridra's hunches sure are accurate." The typhoon I'd been fearing had moved away from us, and the upcoming weather was expected to be sunny. Marie had been worried about it yesterday, but I was glad to see it wouldn't be an issue. Maybe there wouldn't be much traffic either. I considered this as I started to boil some water.

As I turned on the stove, a semitransparent hand appeared from behind me. My heart nearly burst out of my chest, but I calmed myself. These scares couldn't be good for my heart, but Shirley was the good kind of ghost. I should only scream if the other kind appears.

"G-Good morning, Shirley. Aren't you sleepy?" I turned around and saw a sleepy-looking woman before me. I didn't realize that ghosts even slept. She covered her mouth as she let out a big yawn, then pointed at the small pot on the stove, as if to say, "Leave this to me."

"Okay, please take care of this, then. I'll go wake up the others. There's

instant coffee in the bottle over there. And here's the sugar. Feel free to add milk too."

Her sky blue eyes stared at each of the items, then responded with what could have been an affirmative nod...or perhaps she had woken up again after nearly dozing off. Waking up Marie was one thing, but waking up Wridra while she was in deep sleep would take some effort. I tried turning on the indirect lighting next to the bed to its maximum brightness. Then, Wridra's foot kicked me in the butt.

"Ow!" Did she just...kick me in her sleep?

I rubbed my butt as I moved away, but her bare foot lifted up and pointed in my direction as if it was enhanced with an auto-aim skill. This was bad. Not just because I could get kicked, but because she was naked under the thin bedding covering her body. The latter was especially dangerous.

Her clavicles were bare, and the shapely mounds on her chest prevented the comforter from sliding down. And her thighs... No, I couldn't look. Yet she kicked at me with uncanny accuracy, so it was quite the ordeal.

Waking the girls up was a real struggle. I had ended up being hung upside down by the dragon's tail. They say the early bird gets the worm, but I would have just grinned at whoever it was that made up that phrase and told them to give this a try for themselves.

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Sand crunched under the tires as I slowly began to drive the car.

It was still dark outside, so there weren't many cars on the road. The headlights showed that the asphalt was still wet, likely from the typhoon that had changed directions.

We had our travel bag in the trunk, and our bento had already been prepared last night. I had told the others in the dream world that we would be taking a long break, and we were only tagging along for fun, so it wasn't as if anyone had the right to complain.

Still, Doula did pressure us wordlessly.

I knew she was a kind person who cared about her subordinates, but I could tell she wasn't happy about us ducking out partway through. I mean, she *looked* calm, but there was something icy about the way she spoke...

Her team liked her, and she seemed like the ideal superior in my eyes. She was a capable worker, could follow up on her tasks, and always produced results. If she worked at my company, even I might have stayed late, even though I hated working after hours.

Although Borlax Doudou wasn't the floor master after all, the monsters in the area all vanished after we took control of the big room. The demon matter cleared up over time, and it seemed possible for us to fix the communication link for our Magic Tools. We still had to resupply, so the teams would likely return to their base and rest up for a while.

Doula's face had turned red when Zera said, "Well, we should relax for now too." I wondered what that was about.

Doula was surprisingly flustered when she replied, "Y-Yes, maybe you're right," and her men all cheered, but...I decided not to think about it. Come to think of it, they did say something about making kids. So that was why she didn't complain about our travel plans.

I turned on my blinkers, and my car slowly turned toward the freeway. It was very quiet, and the only sounds were those of the cars driving by on the opposite lane. It had been a while since I'd gone on an early morning drive, but my sleepiness had completely vanished.

We would leave Tokyo behind us, heading straight toward Izu. My passengers were sound asleep, but it seemed to me like that fierce battle from the other day had left a spell on them. Even Shirley was rubbing her eyes sleepily after the fight.

I readjusted the blanket that had fallen off of Marie's lap while we were stopped at a red light. Her long eyelashes and well-shaped eyebrows would probably be the envy of all the girls her age. Well, girls her age would actually be older than my grandpa.

Hmm... She's adorable. If I hadn't been driving, I would have loved to take a picture. I took a sip of hot coffee and breathed out. In the back mirror, I could

see that Shirley wasn't fully awake after all. She held on to my shoulders, nodding off with her body being semitransparent.

"Shirley, you could haunt me if you're sleepy. Wouldn't that be easier for you?"

Her sky blue eyes stared drowsily, and she gave me a faint nod. She slipped right into my body, and then the former floor master quietly went to sleep. I could feel her relief, as if she had just found a warm, inviting sleeping spot, and it made me happy.

Yes, I was happy. Just watching Marie and the others filled me with joy. I was sure they would get loud again once they woke up, but that would be fun in its own way.

I picked up the coffee, then stopped myself. I had Shirley inside me now, so I couldn't drink something that would wake me up. I had to give it up for now, but I realized my mouth had curled into a smile. It seemed I was very excited about the Izu trip.

The dark sky began to turn brighter, slowly, from the east.

We had left the house quite early, but Obon was the busiest time of year, so we couldn't help that the streets would get crowded. I observed the traffic and decided we would probably have plenty of time to go sightseeing before we got to the hotel. But since we had avoided that typhoon, the freeway was much more open than I expected.

I had heard it would get busy around seven o'clock, so we still had some time to cruise along. That meant we would probably get to our destination sooner too. Maybe we would get to take a detour before going to that Banana Wani Park that Marie had been looking forward to.

As I drummed the steering wheel with my fingers, someone woke up slowly, as if still fighting off their sleepiness. It had become completely bright out, and only the back seat had curtains to filter the sunlight. Marie must have been awakened by that light.

She rubbed her purple eyes, and then they opened slowly.

She must have been surprised by the unfamiliar three-lane freeway. There

was a long stretch of walls for sound insulation, with lights placed at a set interval. Marie stared at them for a while, glanced forward and back several times, then stretched. A moment later, she yawned.

“Did you sleep well? We still have a while to go, so you can rest for now,” I said.

“I’m sorry, I completely fell asleep. I don’t even remember changing.” She was half asleep when she had changed. That was probably why she’d done her buttons wrong, which she was now fixing.

“So this must be the freeway. The unfamiliar sight woke me right up. Are you sure you’re okay driving so much faster than usual?”

“I would’ve liked to take my time on a leisurely drive, but there’s a minimum speed you have to maintain on this road. They charge you because it’s so much faster, but we’ll be going much slower soon once the road gets more crowded. We’re right around here right now. Have you learned how to use this?”

With that, I took my smartphone out of my chest pocket and handed it to Marie. Thanks to the navigation app, I could go on drives without relying on expensive GPS devices. It didn’t have all the bells and whistles as far as navigation features went, but it wasn’t as if we went on drives all the time, so I didn’t mind.

“Kanagawa-ken, Ebina-shi...? How convenient, our location appears on the map. When I first arrived in Japan, I thought this country used magic for sure. I didn’t think there wasn’t any magic here at all.”

“Yup, magic only exists in fiction and the dream world. But it’s interesting that we all understand what magic is.” It seemed I was able to pique her curiosity just a bit. Her purple eyes lit up, and she gently placed her hand on my thigh. She was quite warm from having just woken up, and her pretty voice rang out with a slight elven accent. Oh, how I loved that voice.

“Yes, and spirits and monsters are known here too. Isn’t it almost as if our worlds are connected somehow?”

“Hm, interesting. If they are connected, I wonder why that would be. There aren’t many people in either world that know about this, but maybe they’re

related at a fundamental level somehow.” It made me so happy talking to Marie that I phrased it in a way I knew would draw her interest. Her eyes lit up even brighter, and I nearly stared at them while driving.

“Though, it could all just be a coincidence.”

“Do you think so? As long as we acknowledge the similarities between our worlds, and since we’re able to travel between them, I think there’s some sort of common ground. Maybe there’s some sort of powerful god connecting them,” Marie said with a joking tone, then looked at the back seat. I figured she was looking for a drink, so I pointed at my bag, and she thanked me.

“A god, huh? Sounds pretty grand.” People tended to seek comfort in gods, over in this world too. They could grant healing powers in the other world, but one thing both worlds had in common is that we couldn’t communicate with the gods directly. I suddenly remembered the other passenger. The sleeping floor master, Shirley, never spoke out loud. She communicated through her gentle demeanor and funny gestures, and I wondered why she never spoke any words.

The freeway continued on, bathed in sunlight. The road was a bit wet, but it would dry up as we drove for a while longer. Marie poured the contents of the canteen into a cup, and the pleasant smell of tea leaves filled the car.

“If I could talk to the gods, I’m sure people from around the world would envy me. Doula once told me that they sing their hymns to please the gods...but no one knows if they’re really pleased by them. They may even find them annoying. There are many people involved with the gods. Probably more people than we can even imagine.” With that, Marie took a sip of the warm tea. Her bright colored lips were curled in a smile, and she seemed to be enjoying the conversation like I was. But there seemed to be something else behind her smile.

“I say it’s okay if our worlds blend together a bit. At the very least, I’m glad they did. It’s so nice that you’re always there whenever I wake up.”

Marie, you’re going to make me smile if you say things like that.

But Marie seemed to be enjoying my reaction, and she giggled while watching me with those pale purple eyes of hers. To be honest, she was way too

adorable.

Marie reached into the bag and brought out something else. It was a colorful piece of fabric, which she used to cover up her hair in the passenger seat. Then, her trademark elven ears disappeared from sight, and her expression told me she was enjoying the Japan trip from the bottom of her heart.

It sure was nice having someone to talk to. The freeway was just a long stretch of the same view, so it made me a bit sleepy. Though, in my case, I never fell asleep once I decided to stay up. Marie smiled.

“This Izu trip is very special to me. Hehe, we’ll be at Banana Wani Park soon. I’m sure those cute alligators will wave to me once we’re there. Oh, I can’t wait!”

Um... Alligators probably aren’t going to wave at you. It wasn’t as if we were in the dream world... Though, they wouldn’t wave to us over there either. Actually, I did recall Lizardmen waving at me.

As I struggled to figure out what to say, I felt something soft press against my cheek with a smooching noise. A sweet, feminine scent remained, and Marie rubbed my cheek with her thumb. When I realized what that sensation was, my heart began pounding faster.

“Good morning, Kazuhiro-san. It’s a lovely morning, isn’t it?” That voice I loved so much whispered, and I felt her warm breath on my ear. Not only was my heart beating harder, but I felt myself grow warmer, and my mouth loosened into a smile.

Marie giggled, but she seemed to have let her guard down. When she looked at the back seat earlier, she must have seen Wridra sound asleep. That was why she figured Wridra wouldn’t see her, but her eyes widened when Shirley emerged out of my body.

Even a bright girl like her couldn’t notice the ghost haunting me. Marie gasped, staring wide-eyed, and Shirley rubbed her own cheek with a puzzled expression. She then tilted her head as if to ask, “What was that just now?” and it was Marie whose face turned bright red this time.



“I-It’s nothing! L-Listen. That was just a kind of greeting. It’s what people do in the morning. It’s completely normal in Japan, okay? Normal!”

R-Right... That was kind of a stretch. But this put an end to Marie’s teasing, and Shirley finally woke up and left my body. Now I could wake myself up with more coffee, so I picked up my cup that had gone cold.

Shirley was awake now, so her skin was slowly becoming more opaque. It seemed she had bought Marie’s earlier explanation, and she put a hand to the elf’s chin, tilted her head up, and gave her a smooch on the cheek.

I spit out my coffee.

Marie turned more and more red as she trembled. It seemed she hadn’t seen this coming at all. Meanwhile, Shirley seemed to enjoy the softness of Marie’s cheek and continued making smooching noises. It was enough to shock me wide awake.

As Marie screamed, the sleeping dragon finally woke up.

“Fwaaah... Hm? You lot are as noisy as always...” Wridra said as she stretched, then gave us an exasperated look. She was probably about to be the next target, so I figured she’d be the one screaming in a minute.

“Gah!” a voice shouted soon after, but the residents of the fantasy world would soon be arriving at Odawara. Things would get wild once we did, as we’d have a nice view of the sea. The girls got rowdy as expected, but I was smiling for some reason.

The car slowly drove along the Seishou bypass.

The gently sloping freeway could be seen overhead, and my passengers all pressed up against the window, marveling at the three-dimensional design. As they looked back toward the front, a blue vehicle crossed the road ahead.

“Oh, oh, look! A shinkansen! We rode on one of those before. I was on the special window-side seat, of course. They’re really fast, but so comfortable. Horse-drawn carriages are rubbish in comparison.”

“S-Stop that, Shirley! Do not stick your head through the car whenever you find something interesting! People will realize you are a ghost! Kitase, you

should have taught her the rules of this world while I was asleep, you witless man!”

Aha, I didn't really have the time for that. I didn't think Shirley would be far more dangerous than the wildly unpredictable Arkdragon or the overly curious elf. I had let my guard down because she was so quiet. But I figured Wridra's anger would subside soon enough. The road gradually sloped ahead, and colorful scenery should be awaiting us.

Marie looked out the window and gasped lightly when she saw the view. Having grown up and learned magic in the elven forest and the Alexei Region, this was the first time she had seen such a sight.

“Wow, wow, wow! Th-The sea! Look, look, is that the sea?!” Marie looked adorable as she glanced back and forth between me and the window. I couldn't help but smile seeing her with the sunlight shining down on her, framed by the horizon in the background.

When someone was going to see this view for the first time in their life, I had to make sure they cherished it. Thinking back, my grandfather had done the same for me.

Fortunately, the weather was nice out, and we were able to arrive here without getting caught up in traffic. I appreciated that it was worth the effort of waking up early. As I took a sip of coffee, we passed by the wall obstructing our view, and the left-side window was filled with the view of a blue horizon.

“Woow! It's the sea! So big!”

“Hm, quite extravagant of them to build a road along the coast. The sky and sea are a beautiful shade of blue. Hah, hah, this will be quite enjoyable,” Wridra remarked.

This view was the reason this driving course was so popular. Though, I spent most of my time indoors, so I hardly ever went out to drive.

We would take our time driving along the coast today. The vast expanse of sea could be seen to the left, and vivid greenery filled our view to the right. Thanks to the weather being clear after the typhoon passed by, we got to enjoy this view to the fullest.

The girls were pressed flat against the windows, and when I rolled them down, the humid wind blew into the car. The faintly salty wind made their hair fly in all directions, and they laughed happily.

“Our vacation at sea begins here. This might be your first time seeing this view, but how is it, Shirley?”

She pointed at the horizon, then made the shape of a zero with her fingers in the back mirror. I already knew the answer from seeing her smile, and Marie laughed, saying, “I thought so!” I hoped they would enjoy the view some more.

Even Wridra’s eyes were full of joy, but the Arkdragon could fly, so I figured she was used to seeing this view already. As I considered this, she turned her black eyes toward me.

“Hah, hah, in my case, flying was simply a means of travel for me. Consider this. Just flying around strikes fear into the hearts of humans. I had been cooped up in my den because I found them a bother to deal with, so this is my first time staring at it from the shore, let alone while riding in a car.” She narrowed her eyes as she smiled happily, making her look like a friendly cat. Her lustrous black hair was being buffeted by the wind too, but she didn’t seem to mind one bit.

“Oh, oh, it’s so big! It’s just like what was in the books, but it’s nothing like the books! Say, can I go outside and look? I’ve read that you can hear endless sounds of crashing waves!”

“Yeah, seems like we’ll get there early, so why don’t we stop by that souvenir shop? Oh, it looks like they’re selling manju. What do you think?”

“Let’s gooo!”

Even Shirley mouthed along with the other girls, which made me smile from ear to ear. I couldn’t help but burst out laughing when I saw the three of them acting like sisters. It was strange to see, considering they were an elf, a dragon, and a former floor master.

I closed the door behind me and let out a “Whoa!” when I saw the view. My body walked toward the fences behind the parking lot of its own accord. Just beyond them were the summer sky and a view of the vast sea glimmering under

the sun.

We could hear the waves rushing against the rocks below, and white foam could be seen when I looked down from the fence. There was a bit of wind today, and Marie stood with one hand holding the hem of her dress and the other holding her hair.

She watched the sight without saying a word. Yet somehow, I felt that she found this time rewarding. She had lived as an elf, a sorceress, and a spirit user for a long time, but she couldn't have experienced this view without some sort of miracle. She stood with the wide horizon before her, and her eyes were shining like precious stones when she turned around.

"Hehe, would you look at that? I've finally come to visit the sea." The fantastical sight of her smile lit by the morning sun filled me with joy. But from her view, my face probably just looked sleepy like usual.

I walked up to Marie, and she naturally held my hand as usual. Her soft skin against mine, I noticed her fingertips were a bit cold. Her white hair danced in the wind as she giggled next to me.

"I'm sure the other elves would have been shocked if they heard that I arrived at the sea right after spending time in the deserts of Arilai. They would be so surprised, I could picture their ears pointing straight up."

"I'm sure they'd be just as surprised if they heard about everything you did at the ancient labyrinth. Those explosions after we got through the escape route gave me chills."

"Oh, that's unfortunate. Does that mean you didn't trust my skills as a Spirit Sorceress? I knew the exact distances I was working with, and I made adjustments so you couldn't get hurt."

And that was the result?! I nearly said it out loud, but come to think of it, no one ended up getting hurt. Though, the heat singed my hair and I fell over, so it wasn't as if things went completely smoothly. Then, I noticed Marie giggling, and I saw that impish look in her eyes.

"Sometimes, I just get this urge to see your surprised face. It's just so funny, you know?"

“Urgh, so you *did* design it to be risky. I knew something was off. Puseri was with me at the time, but she just sped off on her horse and left me behind.”

Hearing this, Marie’s eyes widened for a moment, and then she clutched her sides in a fit of laughter. She must have pictured my pathetic-looking face, but Eve and I did look pretty pale at the time, so I couldn’t deny it. Seeing her laugh so cheerfully, I began to wonder if we really were dating.

Once she finished laughing, Marie watched the sea again with her skirt billowing in the wind.

“It’s so windy today. Maybe it’s because of the typhoon that passed by.” The wind from the sea was quite aggressive, and there was a strangely primal scent to it. Although it was completely different, there was something about it that reminded me of the ancient labyrinth.

“I hear it should settle down by the afternoon. For some reason, the Lady Arkdragon’s weather report is always dead on. To be honest, I debated on whether or not we should postpone the trip. I’m really thankful to her.”

I glanced to the side to find Wridra flashing a peace sign at us. She was the last of Team Amethyst to wake up, but there was no denying that she was the biggest contributor to the Izu trip. It seemed she was wide awake now, and her boots crunched the sand as she walked toward us.

“Hah, hah, how strange it is to see a human show appreciation to a dragon. Though, I hear it is not uncommon for us to be worshipped as gods in this land. In that case, it would only be natural for you to provide offerings to me.”

Wridra glanced at the vendor in the distance, which I took to mean that she wanted some tasty food. She was right that there were many shrines that worshipped dragon gods, but I wondered if any of those dragons were as gluttonous as her. I cocked my head at the thought, but such a dragon existed right in front of me, so there was no point in thinking about it. Then, I noticed that Wridra looked unhappy for some reason.

“This fence is in the way. It is ruining the scenery.”

“You know, there’s a famous viewing spot in Izu. We’re about to head that way, and we’ll see Banana Wani Park if we drive a little more.”

Marie looked excited to hear this, and Shirley tilted her head curiously at the sound of “Banana Wani Park.” Come to think of it, we had brought her along without giving her much of an explanation. I remembered casually asking her if she’d like to tag along to the Izu trip as we were about to fall asleep on the second floor. It went without saying that she hopped right into my body as if to say, “I wanna go!”

“It’s kind of a wild place, full of animals and greenery. By the way, bananas are these tasty, sweet, tropical fruits, and ‘wani’ means ‘alligator’ in Japanese. They’re, uh...kind of like Fire Lizards.”

“Hah, hah, you fool. Your comparison is completely off the mark. Now, hurry and take us to this place with a view. After you purchase those manju confections, of course.”

It was a good thing we had left early to avoid traffic. It gave us extra time to stop by these shops, and we didn’t have to fight the urge to go to the bathroom. And so, we bought some drinks and manju and headed back to the car right away.

It was nice seeing new sights and doing things we didn’t usually do.

The girls clapped along and sang together in the car. They sang a picnic song for children, and they had an adorable rule where they had to imitate animals when they were mentioned in the song.

“Lalalala, and Mr. Goat too! ♪” Marie made a goat noise along with the song, and my face was dangerously close to smiling wide. Her straight, white hair and airy one-piece dress made her look like an adorable doe in my eyes.

The brilliant, majestic sea stretched out before us, and the traffic wasn’t as bad as I had anticipated. I was able to enjoy the summer weather and salty air through the windows as I listened to the girls’ lovely singing.

“Lalalala, and Mr. Cow too!” But when Wridra imitated a mooing cow... Sorry, I tried, but I couldn’t hold it in anymore. The moment I burst out laughing, she shoved a manju into my mouth in retaliation.

Mm, sweet and tasty.

Cheerful laughter and clapping followed once the song ended, and our car

entered a tunnel. Once we got through the tunnel, Jogasaki Coast would be right there.

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The residential buildings around this area looked completely different from those in the city. The pension-style houses stood out here, and there were far more shops geared toward vacationers.

I was a fan of the leisurely atmosphere. We got out of the car after stopping at a modestly sized parking lot, and I felt the peaceful air of sightseeing spots along with the sea breeze. Marie seemed to feel the same way and approached me with a hop in her step.

“We’re finally here! My back hurts.”

“Are you okay? I know this is your first time riding a car for so long.” We stood next to each other and stretched out our limbs. My back made a cracking noise after all that driving.

There weren’t many tourists around because it was still eight in the morning, and most of the people around us had come with their families. My companions sure did draw a lot of attention. They caught a lot of looks just walking around, but they didn’t seem to mind, so I decided not to think about it either. I glanced back to my side to see Marie stretching both hands into the air, and my heart thumped in my chest as I saw her smooth armpits.

“Oh, look! That looks like a nice path to go on a walk. I wonder where it leads?” Her eyes were full of curiosity as she stared at the path, and we naturally started walking in that direction. What awaited the girls was a surprise for once we got there.

The woods were full of trees and mainly consisted of black pines. Before we knew it, we were completely under the trees’ shade. But the path was a bit different from those in the country, with the occasional rough sea breeze and glimpses of the blue sea between the trees. Marie seemed to enjoy these unfamiliar sights, and she looked all around her as she spoke to me.

“The path is paved, but it’s still a bit bumpy. Be careful not to trip, okay?” Marie had a habit of acting like an older sister sometimes. It was heartwarming

to see, but she was the one clinging on to me. Marie looked at her own hand holding mine and looked confused for some reason.

“Oh, I didn’t even notice I was holding your hand. Since when was that there?”

“Hm, that’s a difficult question. I think it’d be easier to remember when you let go.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Marie said, and smiled as we continued walking on this quiet morning.

There were small flowers growing along our path, and I considered that this was the perfect route for a nice stroll. As we continued walking straight along the way, the fatigue from the long drive all but vanished.

“Ah, the view is so nice when it’s bright out. As an elf, I’ve been called strange for reading all the time, but I still enjoyed going on walks every morning, so I thought I would go mad when I moved to Alexei.”

Come to think of it, she always seemed to be in a bad mood when I reunited with her there. I remembered her saying she was fed up with her room smelling like boiled noinoui, a vegetable that looked a lot like onions.

“Lately, we’ve been walking along the path by the riverbed and through the second floor. It’s really nice going on strolls at places like these too.” I nodded in agreement. I had enjoyed exploring the dream world since I was young, and walking was a big part of my daily life. The peaceful feeling from looking at plants native to each region and seeing animals that lived there was something that could be enjoyed by elves and humans alike.

“Though, in my case, it was only recently that I’ve come to realize Japan’s charms,” I said.

“What’s with that? You make it sound as if I’m the one who invited you here. Hehe, you’re so strange,” Marie laughed, but she was right. In my memories of seeing cherry blossoms on a weekday, going on a hot springs trip, and returning to Aomori, Marie was always there. It was like we were complete opposites. I led Marie by the hand in the dream world, while Marie led me along with her curiosity here in Japan. Maybe we saw the charms of each other’s world

because we felt that the grass was greener on the other side.

The sloppily paved path was quite bumpy, with many ups and downs because it was designed without flattening the natural shape of the ground much. Because of this, Marie gradually became short of breath and fell quiet. Despite her elven blood making her a good walker, she didn't have much stamina as a Spirit Sorceress.

Maybe this path was intentionally made like this. The thought came to me when we reached the top of the slope and the sea breeze embraced us.

The sound of crashing waves could be heard, and the vast sea filled our vision. Marie gasped as a gust blew by and waves crashed against the rocks, the hem of her dress fluttering in the wind.

"It's so pretty... The complex blend of different blues makes me feel like I'm looking at some sort of painting." Her voice sounded dreamy in my ears.

The Japanese sea was quite nice. It sounded majestic, and there was a grandness to it that hinted at the size of this earth and the fact that there were even bigger worlds beyond. We stayed motionless for a while, trying to comprehend what we were seeing. There was such an overload of information that we couldn't process it, and just stared into the colorful depths of the sea. In the end, my brain came up with one simple word: beautiful. Marie kept her gaze fixed upon the sea that was just bright as the sky and spoke faintly.

"I'm so glad I came. This is definitely a view everyone should see at least once in their life."

"I think it's a bit too early to say that. Our trip is just getting started, and there's plenty more to see." Marie slowly turned around. Her expression told me she had gained something from this experience. She held on to her hair as it swayed in the wind and moved her bare shoulders closer to me.

"I wonder if the wind is so strong because of the typhoon. Let's keep going. I want to see what else there is." And finally, the elf girl started walking again.

The paths along the sea were some of Jogasaki's highlights. The beautiful blue sea filled most of my vision, but the soil here was poor due to being on a lava plateau. Yet, since there was plenty of sunlight, the plants here emerged

victorious over the unfavorable conditions.

We walked through the path surrounded by plants, enjoying the contrast between the greenery, the rocks, and the sea adorned with black pines. The waves constantly hit the sheer black rocks, and we lost ourselves staring as they changed from marine blue to platinum white.

“The colors are so pretty. It’s like aquamarine melting in water.”

“I hear that gemstone means ‘seawater.’ By the way, I think there’s another spot up ahead, Marie,” I said as I turned around, and then I realized we had left Wridra and Shirley behind. I wasn’t sure if they were keeping their distance to be considerate to us or because they were brainstorming ideas on how to arrange the second floor.

We continued along the gently curving path, and our destination slowly came into view. The bridge held by wires was suspended from a sheer rocky outcrop and supported by sturdy-looking brown posts. Here, we were able to see the sea underfoot in addition to the scenery before us.

It was fifty meters in height and secured by wires, but it had an excellent view without anything blocking the way. The sign read, “No more than a hundred people should be on the bridge at a time,” which sounded kind of scary. I stood in front of it so Marie’s view of it would be obscured. Otherwise, we may have ended up having to go back.

“Ah, a suspension bridge! Hm, this must be worth seeing!” Wridra exclaimed.

“I hear there was a volcanic eruption around here four thousand years ago. They say there’s some amazing sights of naturally formed beauty. You should look forward to it.” Wridra must have flown much higher before, but she seemed giddy about these places with high elevation for some reason. I stepped forward so we could check it out in person, then felt someone grab my hand. I turned around and saw that Marie looked rather pale.

“What’s wrong, Marie?”

“Everyone, don’t let your guard down. Look, the bridge is moving.” I looked at the bridge as I was told, and... Well, I supposed it was kind of moving.

“Well, it is a suspension bridge. A typhoon has just passed by recently.

Regardless, a bit of wind would obviously cause it to sway to some degree,” Wridra said, then laughed. “Do not be such a coward.” Although, I had already given up at this point. Marie had a terrible fear of earthquakes, and walking on unstable footing was out of the question for her.

“We have no choice. Let’s give it up,” I said.

“Yes, that’s a wise decision,” Marie agreed. “Even if it has the best view in Izu, there’s no need to put ourselves at risk just to see it. We can save the adventures for the ancient labyrinth.”

Wridra looked at us, mouth agape with shock.

“Stop right there! Kitase, you coddle Marie far too much. She is not some newborn! B-Besides, what makes the ancient labyrinth acceptable while you turn away from a suspension bridge? I cannot even fathom your reasoning!” I had trouble deciding how to respond.

“Um, well, the ancient labyrinth isn’t really dangerous. It’s more like a place to have some fun and exercise. When strong enemies come up, it’s a nice form of stress relief, and...”

“No!!! Do you think of it as some sort of sports ground?! Look, even Shirley is confused.”

With that, Wridra pulled Shirley closer by her shoulder, but I had heard that Wridra herself had punched “Demon Arms” Kartina after being influenced by a certain boxing manga. With her bare hands, no less.

Shirley didn’t say a word, but I could see that she kind of understood where we were coming from. Between the pizza tasting party, kind friends, time spent doodling in her Monster Book, and our little lap pillow moment, there wasn’t really any point when we were in real danger.

Shirley wordlessly held Marie’s hand, then lifted it above her head. The gesture meant she had declared the winner.

“We won,” I said.

“Yes,” Marie replied.

“So there we have it. The ancient labyrinth is the perfect place to lose some

weight.”

“You traitor! No, no, I want to cross the bridge! I do not want to leave after walking all this way without experiencing the best part of traveling!”

I’m not sure an Arkdragon should be whining like a child in public... Not to mention, the other families nearby were staring at us.

In the end, Shirley and Wridra ended up crossing the bridge together, and we watched them take a bunch of pictures in our stead.

After waiting for some time, the two finally returned.

“Ohh, that was a beautiful sight. Such majesty can only be experienced in person. I am certainly glad we have come to visit eastern Izu. It seems that human and that elf over there do not understand. Bleh,” Wridra boasted out loud before sticking her tongue out at us. She sent sidelong glances at Marie, and I wondered if she was trying to get her to tag along.

Although Marie was really bad with earthquakes and heights, she had an incredibly curious nature. I felt her restlessness while holding her hand, and I could tell that she was struggling between her fear and urge to see the unknown. All I could do here was give her a little encouragement.

“There’s no need to cross the bridge all the way. Why don’t you try taking a peek, then coming back right away?”

“Yes, you’re right. Let’s do that. I’d like to take just one picture with the sea at our backs.” I was more than happy to take it for her, of course.

Marie held my hand with a far stronger grip than usual, then bravely took her first step forward.

The contrast of the majestic sea in the background and Marie’s weak-kneed posture made for a nice picture. A picture of a teary-eyed Ms. Elf flashing a peace sign was quite rare, so I had to thank Wridra later.

Everyone was starting to get hungry after all that excitement. And so, we decided to get a boxed lunch so we could look out over the sea with our meal.

The sun had risen, and the Higashiizu Highway was getting quite congested. But we didn’t mind, and our car remained stationary. After all, we had a view of

the Pacific Ocean from our parked car, making it the perfect spot to have some lunch.

All that could be seen through the window was a short hedge. There was a sheer, arching cliff in the direction the car was facing, and once we opened the windows and shut off the engine, we could hear the waves in the distance. I turned around and asked the girls what they thought of this spot, and all three of them nodded.

“It’s perfect! It’s bright, the view is pretty, and it feels like we have the ocean all to ourselves!” Marie tapped her feet happily. It was a bit windy, but our meal would probably taste better with the sea before us.

“Ah, what a wonderful view. Having lunch with a view of the Pacific Ocean is quite the luxury.”

“Yeah, I’m glad we found such a nice spot. Can you grab that bag over there? The food is in it. There are only three boxed lunches, so I don’t mind sharing with Shirley.” And by “sharing,” I meant I would eat the meal while she haunted me. Shirley had been looking at the food longingly, and she nodded cheerfully upon hearing my suggestion.

Judging by the look on her face, it seemed she wasn’t against the idea of haunting me. Her body became semi-transparent, which I assumed was because she was getting ready. She held onto my shoulders, and then I felt her going inside of me as I thought I heard someone say, “Pardon me.” I wasn’t sure if her heart was thumping from the excitement of the view or her anticipation for the meal.

“This one is Marie’s, and the big one is for Wridra.” I handed the meals to each of them, and they smiled and thanked me. The beautiful sight of the elf girl’s white hair and the dragon’s black hair fluttering in the wind with the sea at their backs made me think I was dreaming or something. Well, they *had* literally come from a dream world.

It was right around noon, and the sun was high in the eastern sky. It was bright in the car thanks to the sunlight reflecting off the water, and Marie happily undid the sky blue wrappings on her lunch box.

“I’m starving. Maybe it’s because I had that terrifying experience at the

bridge.”

“You only crossed a small portion of it. And when you finally managed to speak, you barely squeaked out that you wished to go home,” Wridra pointed out.

“Hey! You won’t get any of the food we made if you’re going to say things like that. What a shame, they’re some of our best work after we spent so much time making them,” Marie said, her brows furrowed, but Wridra hugged the lunch box defensively.

“I will not give it back!”

It was true that we had spent a lot of time on them. In fact, it took about two hours of work. It was probably...no, *definitely* the most time I had spent on cooking anything. The reason it took so long was...

Wridra was giddy as she undid the wrappings for the boxed lunch. There, she found an adorable character smiling right back at her. She blinked several times, then opened her mouth wide.

“Aha ha ha! The resemblance is uncanny!”

“Oh my goodness, sooo cuuute!!!”

I could understand their reactions of rolling on the floor laughing and squirming. Our lunches were character bentos, which were literally boxed lunches arranged to look like famous characters.

The elliptical rice balls used seaweed to form eyes and mouths, and they greeted us with both hands raised in celebration. The original motif was popular among both children and adults, and it was the main reason Marie had taken such a liking to anime in the first place.

The characters had adorable faces with meatballs and quail eggs for eyes. The colorful decorations consisting of lettuce, rolled omelets, and mini tomatoes made Marie’s face loosen into a lovestruck smile.

“Ohh, I can’t believe it! How can such adorable bentos exist?! Oh, pictures, pictures! Take a picture for me, quick!”

Whoa, she’s really excited.

I couldn't blame her, considering she just saw one of her favorite things at a perfect leisure spot after spending all that time making these lunches. And so, I pulled out my smartphone and pointed it at Marie grinning with the boxed lunch in hand. Wridra also moved her face closer and flashed a grin just like the featured character, and I snapped a picture.

Hmm, this picture's perfect. I'm saving it forever.

"Well then, let us eat. It looks delicious!"

"..."

But Marie froze in place. She stared at the character before her with her chopsticks in hand, then glanced at the rest of us several times, and her expression turned sadder and sadder. She looked as if tears would fall from her eyes any minute.

For some reason, her cheerful smile had collapsed all at once. Wridra and I looked at Marie.

"I-I'm not a child. It's not like... I can't eat it..." It was as if she was trying to make excuses to us. I had kind of expected this, but she had become emotionally attached to the cute character.

Wridra and I exchanged looks. Apparently, it was my role to step up at times like these, as the Arkdragon raised an eyebrow at me. The gesture probably meant something like, "Good luck," or "You handle this." Of course, I couldn't just make her eat her favorite character. But there was no need for me to convince her in my own words. Since it was a character she liked, all I had to do was let him talk to her.

"Marie, the best part of character bentos is appreciating their cuteness and having fun eating them. If you don't, you might make him sad." I picked up a pair of chopsticks and moved the character's pupils slightly.

He was now looking up at Marie, as if to say, "Aren't you gonna eat me?" Marie and the character stared at each other, and I saw her purple eyes light up.

"Did he say something?"

“...He’s asking me why I’m not eating him, even though he’s delicious. This isn’t fair. How can he want me to eat him when he’s so adorable? Doesn’t he know how this makes me feel?” She pouted her lips as she picked up her chopsticks. Then, she flashed her white teeth to match the character’s expression.

“Oh, fine. Let’s dig in then.” Wridra gave me an approving look, and then we all said our usual pre-meal greeting of “*Itadakimasu.*”

And so, our lunch with the view of the Pacific Ocean had begun. The main attraction was the character with a distinctive physique. It was wrapped in seaweed like a rice ball, and there were some fun surprises inside once opened up.

“Hm?! There is tuna mayo in here! Quite admirable of you to know my favorite food!”

“Yes, we secretly put in your favorites. Kazuhiro-san made mine, so I’m not sure what’s in here... Oh, hamburg steak with cheese!” Yes, the characters had an important role. They were to spread happiness and satisfy everyone’s taste buds by containing their favorite dishes within them. Joy lit up in Marie’s and Wridra’s eyes as they ate.

As for me, my sense of taste was dulled due to Shirley haunting me. Although it was tasteless and odorless, I could sense her emotions as she enjoyed the food, so it was very satisfying for me.

I couldn’t actually see her, but the thought of her squirming blissfully with each bite made me quite happy. That was part of the reason why I put so much effort into cooking.

“Mmm, I love it! It feels even better than usual with this view.” The blue sky and blue sea. Izu Oshima Island could be seen on the horizon. It was a lively lunch with residents of a fantasy world and anime characters coming together. The summer sun was quite strong, but the wind passing through the car windows made the heat more manageable.

“Oh, let’s have some tea. Uva tea is kind of similar to the tea leaves from Arilai, I think.” The jellyfish Marie had summoned earlier added ice to our paper cups for us. The tea leaves coming out of the pot smelled like sweet, fragrant

roses. The nice thing about uva tea was that you could enjoy the scent as well as the flavor.

“Oh, it smells a lot like what you’d find in Arilai! Mm, it’s nice and refreshing when it’s chilled like this.”

“Thanks to you two, I have come to enjoy tea as well. It feels quite depraved for a dragon to savor such indulgences.”

That’s odd. Isn’t this the same dragon that stuffed her face with beer and a katsu bowl the first day we met?

They seemed to be reminiscing about the distant land of Arilai as they smelled the tea. Apparently, they had become fond of that place after making so many fun memories there.

“So, are we finally going to Banana Wani Park after this?”

“Of course. It’s really close, so we should get there in no time even if there’s a bit of traffic. There’s a lot of plants and animals, so I’m sure Shirley will have fun too.” I felt her heart thumping inside of me. Her childlike excitement felt a bit ticklish, and I squirmed slightly from the sensation.

I took a few more pictures as the girls ate, and after getting some shots of their happy smiles and peace signs, our bento boxes soon became empty. And so, having finished our meal, we got in the car and I started driving slowly. I wasn’t able to taste the food at all, but it was quite a wonderful lunch.

§

The traffic calmed down significantly as we turned into the back roads away from the coast. The scenery was replaced by mountains, and it looked a bit drab without a view of the sea. Marie was staring out the window as we drove up a slope, and she suddenly raised her voice in surprise. A dome-shaped structure that looked like a botanical garden had come into view. I turned on my blinkers and parked the car.

I considered how strange Japanese tourist attractions tended to be. The Banana Wani Park building looked plain like a community center, and I wondered for a moment if we were really at the right spot. There were no real distinguishing features about the parking lot other than the few tropical plants

growing there, so it was natural to wonder. I murmured to myself as we got out of the car, then noticed that Marie was waving her pointer finger side-to-side for some reason.

“You’ve lived in Japan for twenty-five years and you still don’t understand?”

“What do you mean?” I wasn’t sure why she was asking me this. As I tried to figure it out, Marie lined up next to me. She then looked up at me with a smug expression.

“Japanese tourist attractions first trick you with their appearance. You let your guard down, but then they getcha with the gap between your expectations and reality.” She made an eating gesture with her hands, and I worried that Marie was a bit too lenient when it came to anything Japan-related. I hoped she wouldn’t end up being disappointed.

As I considered this, I noticed that Marie’s hand was wandering in the air, as if searching for something. She mentioned that she didn’t notice when she held my hand, but it seemed her hand really was seeking mine subconsciously. Our hands met as if it was the most natural thing in the world, and her slender fingers wrapped around mine. It seemed she didn’t even notice, and she looked up at me and tilted her head as if to ask, “What is it?”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing. I welcome it wholeheartedly.”

“What in the world are you talking about? Anyway, it would be terrible if it got too crowded or they ran out of tickets. We should hurry, unless you want to cry yourself to sleep tonight.”

Whoa, she looks serious.

Marie called out to the others to hurry as they exited the car, and I could see she was raring to go. Come to think of it, this was Marie’s main destination of the trip.

Wridra gave me a strange look that seemed to mean, “What is going on with Marie?” but I couldn’t respond as I was getting led by the hand.

Amidst the lively atmosphere we entered the building labeled, “Atagawa Banana Wani Park.”

The building was quite... cozy. If it wasn't for Marie, I doubt I would have picked it as a tourist destination. Though, the old me wouldn't have even left my room during Obon week to begin with. Considering that, it felt strange that I had come to a foreign place like this, and the thought of something new awaiting me made my heart beat with anticipation. It almost felt like traveling through the dream world.

"Wow..."

The blue sky was shining through the dome-shaped greenhouse, bringing in plenty of the summer sunlight. But this meant the seasonal heat was even worse than outside, and I regretted coming here in the middle of summer.

"Sooo hoooot!" But for some reason, Marie was all smiles.

She fanned her face in the midday heat, but her smile was just as bright as the sunlight. It was no wonder; she was here in the Banana Wani Park, the facility she was looking forward to so much that it appeared in her dreams... Though, she didn't actually dream, considering we just traveled between worlds whenever we fell asleep.

There were many couples and families with children among the other guests. They were all dressed lightly with short sleeves, and they were sweating profusely while complaining about the heat like us. It seemed they were all enjoying their leisure time during Obon vacation. Come to think of it, Izu's Obon timing was different from the rest. It went from the end of July to the beginning of August, if I recalled correctly. So, the people enjoying their vacation now were mostly people who had Obon sometime around August 15th or so.

Of course, this facility wasn't just hot. There were plants that looked like tropical palms all over, and the pale brown boulders decorating the place gave it a tourist attraction type of atmosphere. The aquatic smell in the air made me feel like I was traveling through a distant tropical world.

"This place has a sort of easy-going atmosphere to it, doesn't it? I wonder if it's because of this dopey-looking character," I said as I poked the mascot stuffed animal at the entrance. There was something humorous about the silly-looking, bipedal alligator in loose clothing. But Marie took this opportunity to poke fun at me and nudged my chest with her bare shoulder.

“Oh, look who’s one to talk. You’re the laid-back mascot character of Team Amethyst, you know. It’s easy to tell just by your name, Kazuhiho.” I didn’t realize that even my name sounded laid-back. Though, I felt like Marie was more laid-back than I was as of late.

In any case, it seemed she didn’t mind sweating so much in the tropical environment. In fact, she claimed that feeling the sweat on her skin was part of the experience and added to the ambiance. I kind of understood what she meant, perhaps because I felt a sense of nostalgia that reminded me of the Showa era. I had heard this was a place that adults could enjoy too, probably because of the familiar atmosphere that brought back one’s inner child.

Maybe “tasteful” was an apt way to put it. Rather than just being pristine, the distinct atmosphere of the Showa era gave it a sense of history. We walked around the park as I thought about this, then felt someone squeeze my hand. I looked over and saw Marie looking at me as if she couldn’t wait any longer.

“Come on, come on! Let’s go see the alligators!”

“Ha ha, sure thing. Let’s go find the scary alligators that are after a certain elf.” When I made a biting gesture with my open hand, Marie shrugged her head ticklishly and flashed her white teeth with a big smile. She really was the cutest when she smiled.

“Oh, how scary. But they might prefer sleepy humans over elves. After all, they would be easy to catch and gobble up.” She kind of had a point there. I mean, I did get caught by monsters all the time.

I turned around as I was guided by my hand, and I saw that Wridra and Shirley were following us while looking around curiously. They didn’t seem to understand what kind of place this was, but it would be faster to show them rather than explain. And so, I kept walking with Marie leading me forward. I sensed a smile creeping up because of all the exuberance I could feel through her hand.

The stars of the show, the alligators, looked down at us beyond the brown fence. Marie’s light purple eyes lit up with excitement as she saw the creatures with large, craggy scales the color of rocks on the riverbank with their mouths half-open.

She beckoned me over for some reason, then stood on her tiptoes to whisper something in my ear. She put a hand around my ear and said, “Monster!” softly into my ear. I had to correct her mistake before she made my face break down into a sloppy smile.

“They aren’t monsters. They’re animals that live in the tropics.”

“Oh, you must be right. They would have attacked us already if they were monsters.” She may have been a bit confused by what she saw. The animals laid completely still in the sun. They seemed to be sunbathing, each of them peacefully resting at their favorite spots near the rocks or water.

They seemed quite powerful, with their spiky backs and massive jaws. But they were far more immobile than we had expected, and I felt as if we were watching some elaborate stone statues. Marie crouched down next to the fence, her knees peeking out from her white dress.

“So this is what happens when you remove the ‘man’ from a Lizardman.”

“Hm, they do look similar. Perhaps this is how they would look if they decided to stop walking on two feet,” Wridra said as she approached from behind, then placed her hand on Marie’s shoulder and peeked over. I was surprised by how immobile they really were. Some of them slept with their mouths wide open, which made Marie giggle.

“Alligators and crocodiles are mostly nocturnal. That’s why they bask in the sun like that during the day,” I explained, and Wridra and Marie looked at me, impressed.

“They are even more alike than I thought. I have had them working under me for some time now, but there have not been any intruders as of late, and they are a tad too crude to look after my children. With less work for them to do, they have been spending most of their time sleeping just like this.”

“They were such nice Lizardmen. I remember they taught me how to speak their language. Come to think of it, they showed me where your sleeping spot is too.”

“Yes, they are not too intelligent, so giving guidance and cleaning are about all they can manage. Though, they are quite useful for simple tasks... Hm.” Wridra

seemed to realize something and turned to face Shirley beside her. Shirley seemed curious about this unknown creature, and she was staring with her sky blue eyes through the fence.

“Shirley, I would not mind letting the Lizardmen work under you. You must be thinking of expanding the second floor soon. That would be far better than letting them lie around in boredom.” Marie and I blinked. We didn’t expect Wridra to talk about expanding the second floor, and we were surprised that it was even possible, considering it was already as spacious as the Tokyo Dome. Shirley smiled.

“Wait, are you serious? That place is going to get even bigger?”

“What are you surprised about? Do you not recall how many monsters have been added to Shirley’s book on the third floor? It is only logical that we must expand the space for the circulation of souls.” I never thought of it that way. We listened to her explanation about the second floor as we walked around the park. The small alligators we saw through the tank had funny, somewhat nihilistic expressions on their faces. One alligator stared at Marie for a while, then blew a bubble out of its mouth.

“If you’re expanding the place, it must be difficult to manage it. I’d like to have more fun with Shirley and keep raiding with her, if possible.”

Hearing this, a wide grin spread across Shirley’s face. Her smile was so genuine, I could feel her emotions even without the use of words. Strangely, it made me wonder if words were even necessary at all.

“Regarding that... There are many monsters with high intelligence that serve Shirley as well. That ‘Demon Arms’ Kartina is one of them, and there will be much less of a workload for Shirley with the additional help from my Lizardmen.”

“Huh, I didn’t realize Kartina was considered a monster. I couldn’t really tell whether Demon Arms was equipment or a monster. But I guess if she’s stored in the Monster Book, that explains it.” Wridra smiled as if in agreement.

That meant the second floor was going to get even more lively. The pumpkin seeds we had sown wouldn’t sprout for some time, but maybe we could have the monsters handle growing the vegetables. I looked at the fence as I

considered this, then yelped in surprise. A creature about four meters in length was floating in the water. It went without saying that Marie also reacted to its appearance.

“Wow! So big! Look, Kazuhiro-san, that one could probably swallow you whole.” With that, she made clawing motions on my shoulder. It tickled, but at least I wasn’t actually getting eaten.

“Wait, why do you want me to get swallowed up so much? But boy, that thing’s as big as a car.” There was something fascinating about massive animals. Although it moved rather slowly, there was a sense of presence about it from having lived for so many years.

Judging by the fact that it was in a cage by itself, perhaps it was too aggressive to mingle with the others. They were carnivores after all, so it could have been a way to prevent them from fighting among one another. The crocodile’s eye membrane opened as it emerged from the water, and its demeanor changed as its golden, reptilian eyes turned to us. The creature splashed around as it swam right up to the fence.

It pressed his massive front legs on the edge and pushed against it forcefully. The fence creaked against the crocodile’s scales, and the sightseers around us cheered at the intensity. The park full of nocturnal creatures was rather quiet, but the animals there became ferocious once they actually started moving.

“Hah, hah, what a magnificent female. I see, I see. You bore many children here, did you?” Only Wridra was unfazed, and she simply smiled at the reptile. As a friend of the Lizardmen, the Arkdragon seemed to be able to communicate even with large estuarine crocodiles. They stared at each other for some time. Then, seemingly satisfied, the crocodile closed her eyes, then slowly swam away.

The park fell quiet once again as if nothing had happened, and Wridra muttered.

“I had assumed they despise being caged in here, but it seems that one does not mind too much. She says she has been enjoying her time in leisure here. And supposedly, the food is quite good.” I really didn’t expect her to be able to communicate with these reptiles so well. But considering she was an

Arkdragon, there probably weren't a lot of things she couldn't do. Just then, I remembered something.

"Oh yeah, I heard you took down Kartina in one punch. I wish I could've been there to see it."

"Aha, it was quite a battle. My signature move, the Phantom Left, was the deciding factor. I now have an interest in Japanese martial arts as well, so I can teach you sometime if you wish."

Uh, no thank you.

Why in the world would I want to learn boxing in a fantasy world? I made a face that meant I was obviously against the idea, but Wridra paid no mind. Her eyes were full of excitement as she threw out lightning-fast right jabs. I wanted to warn her that the fathers around us would stare at her breasts if she kept throwing out punches in her tank top like that.

"I will have you know I am quite the strict teacher. But if you can endure my training, you can become the greatest in the world."

"Then I'll have to decline. Ha ha, I'd probably reek of sweat if I picked up boxing anyway." A fist sank right into my stomach.

I see, Kartina must have shouted "Guh!" and sank to the ground just like this. It would have been impossible to win against this. I probably would have ended up in even worse shape if Wridra decided to hit me with her so-called "Phantom Left." My girlfriend Marie was completely absorbed in the crocodile and didn't even notice that I was curled up on the ground.

We stopped in our tracks as soon as we entered the greenhouse. It was due to the sunlight beaming down on us through the glass and the humidity that was even higher than the crocodile and alligator park we were just in.

"Wow, it's just like our bath at home!" Marie said, turning around from the front to face us. Her expression was cheerful despite the situation, and her light purple eyes were more colorful than the hibiscus flowers around us. Wridra looked up at the plants with folded leaves with a sparkle in her eyes.

"Hm, so these are the kinds of plants that grow in tropical rainforests. They have such peculiar, bendy shapes. I did not think plants could be gathered to be

used in a business like this.”

Beads of sweat had formed on their necks from the humidity. But their curiosity piqued by the interesting sight seemed to have taken priority, and they just poked at the decorative plants without concern for the heat. Shirley’s sky blue eyes were also sparkling with wonder, her mouth hanging half-open. Her head swayed to the left and right as if she was dancing, and she was completely mesmerized by the rows of various unusual plants here.

“Shirley, if you’re interested, why don’t we make a botanical garden? I’m sure you could make a greenhouse with Wridra’s help too,” I whispered, and her eyes lit up even brighter. The greenery on the second floor was beautiful, and it made me feel at peace just looking at it. She must have pictured adding small footpaths with pretty flowers planted on each side, and a greenhouse full of rare, foreign plants. I had heard Wridra talking about expansion earlier, but I was sure they could work on other kinds of development as well.

Overwhelmed with emotion, Shirley expressed her joy by stamping her feet in place. It was rare seeing Shirley this excited. Come to think of it, she had existed since a long, long time ago. Having continued to protect her forest for all this time, it must have been an amazing feeling to discover plants she had never seen before.

“Since we’re here, you should look at them to your heart’s content. But some of them are interesting to touch. Look, like this one.” I drew their attention to a plant that seemed to be a type of fern. I crouched in front of the plant, then gestured for them to touch it. Marie gingerly extended her finger, then...

“Wow! It closed! What is this?!”

“Hm, what a curious plant. It closed its leaves on touch.”

I also reached out and touched the leaves, which closed up in response. It felt a bit ticklish to touch, and it took me back to when I was a child. I looked over at the girls who were staring in wide-eyed wonder and pointed at a nearby sign.

“These are called *Mimosa pudica*. Supposedly, they shrink their leaves so animals won’t eat them.” It was just a common theory, but it seemed to be effective, considering they could be found around the world.

“My, what a clever plant! This does make them look wilted and unappetizing. There are plants that attack you in the other world, so these are like the complete opposite.”

“Oh, those. I don’t know how many times I got dissolved by them. They’re surprisingly strong.” It was hard to tell them apart from the other plants, so I usually had to fight them with my foot caught in their vines. They were pretty much the perfect counter to a mobile fighter like me. We all reminisced about the past and laughed together.

Seeing something for the first time was always a curious experience. I was having fun seeing plants that were only found in tropical climates too. It was said that there were over five thousand species of these plants, and the elf girl, dragon, and ghost all stared with childlike wonder.

The water lily, a type of flower that resembled Marie’s eyes, was among them. The open petals had a purple color that grew darker toward the tip and made the viewer want to move closer to get a better look. They had a gentle, clean sort of scent that tickled my nose. There were other plants floating in the pond, like the *Victoria amazonica*, which was known as the queen of water lilies and could even hold up small children.

I had thought Banana Wani Park was somewhat mundane at first, but I came to realize it was a place where I could discover new things everywhere I looked. It was a strange feeling, and I couldn’t help but express how I felt.

“They did such a great job making this place entertaining despite its unassuming building.”

“Oh, I see you’ve finally figured it out. Japanese tourist attractions are never what they seem on the outside. This is why you...” Marie trailed off. She was distracted by the big, round creature drifting beyond the acrylic panel in the middle of the botanical garden. The beady-eyed animal known as the mermaid of the amazons floated serenely in the water. This was the only place in Japan where one could see the Amazonian manatee.

“Wooow...” It had been facing away from us at first, but as soon as it noticed Marie, it blew out some bubbles and turned around. It then moved its short fins and pointed its puffy, pig-like snout at her.

It was a strange sight, seeing a manatee and elf meet for the first time. They were each in their own world of vivid blues and verdant greens. Somehow, I felt like there was a fantasy-like quality to the scene.

Marie placed her pale, slender hand on the acrylic panel, and the manatee pressed his nose on the other side. This image at Banana Wani Park was ingrained into my mind. This was what making memories on trips was all about.

Seeing these two wondrous beings meet was strangely touching. I snuck a picture to capture the moment, which I was sure the rosy-faced Marie would appreciate. I decided to show it to her after we got back from our trip.



The skies were clear above the rooftop terrace, with a view that was completely worth the trip up the mountain. Mountains surrounded us on both sides, and ahead was a sea of cobalt blue. It was a summery, colorful sight, and we could even see Izu Oshima Island in the distance.

Bright yellow soft serve ice cream was somewhat unusual. It was made with the park's theme, bananas, and Marie gave me a curious look when she saw one for the first time.

The girls leaned against the railing and dug into their soft serves. The airy ice cream melted on their tongues, leaving a natural sweetness as it passed through their throats. The icy treat was perfect for cooling down after hanging out in the greenhouse, and it left a sweet, tropical, banana-flavored aftertaste.

"Mmm, so cold and tasty!"

"Mmf, I can taste the banana within the sweetness!"

Their bodies interpreted it as necessary sustenance, so all they had to do now was enjoy it to the fullest. They took in the surrounding leisure area full of hotels as they continued tasting the delicious soft serve. I was having fun just watching them enjoy themselves.

Marie stretched her limbs, then sighed contentedly.

"The beautiful sea, all this nature around us... I'm so glad we came to Izu."

"This is quite unfair. Japan is simply unbeatable when it comes to flavor. I cannot help but feel glad to be here whenever I eat something delicious."

Despite her pseudo-complaint, Wridra was smiling happily, completely mesmerized by her soft serve. Shirley nodded with a dreamy expression, perhaps because she had liked the greenhouse so much, or because she had just tasted ice cream for the first time. She paid no mind to her blonde hair billowing in the wind and simply enjoyed the flavor and view. As I watched them, I felt that they had taught me how to truly have fun while on vacation.

I stared at the sea with the girls, work completely out of my mind, and felt a sense of excitement and wonder welling up inside me.

The faint smell of salt carried on the wind reminded me that we were indeed

on a trip away from home. It was completely different from the city I was so used to, and it still felt strange that we were out here having fun. I even felt tension that I didn't know I had escaping my shoulders.

Then I noticed someone warmly embracing me from the side. The elf girl was soft and slender, and my finger brushed against her shoulder blades as I put my arm around her.

"I've been looking forward to coming here for so long, and I'm glad I did. Thank you for bringing me here, Kazuhiro-san."

Her happy smile made my mouth curl just a bit more than usual. It seemed Marie was completely relaxed, just like me. To be honest, she was the one who made this all enjoyable for me. I was a bit embarrassed to say so out loud, so I decided to say something else instead.

"We'll be heading to the hotel soon, but it's always a good idea to take a hot bath after a long day of travel. What do you say to spending some time in an open-air bath?" It wasn't just Marie's eyes that went wide with surprise. With the beautiful, vivid sea and clear skies here, the view from the bath would be exquisite.

"Oh, oh, that sounds amazing! I can't wait!" She tapped her feet in place adorably, and I mentally told myself that I had to make sure she would have the time of her life.

The girls were absolutely giddy as we left the terrace and headed toward the hotel.

Oh, that's right. I forgot there's something I need to ask of Shirley first.

Epilogue

It went without saying that inns existed in the dream world as well. Many of them had a dining hall and reception area on the first floor, with rooms for lodging on the second floor, and payment was usually done on a pay-as-you-go basis. There were even inns like dilapidated hovels or stables in the dream world, but their basic principles remained the same. That being said, the workers there didn't trust their guests one bit. They often had to intimidate their guests to make sure they coughed up what they owed, as it was very common for ruffians to refuse payment.

"Wow, so spacious! This place has such a modern design."

"Hm. Despite the Japanese-style design, the flooring is made of marble. Not to mention, I smell incense in the air. It is hard to believe this is the reception area of an inn... I do wonder why so much money was spent on the entrance."

As for inns in Japan, it was the complete opposite of the dream world.

Though they were alike in the sense that they took care in managing their customers, in this case, they provided the carrot rather than the stick. For example, the sunlit sofa that could be seen on the other side had been put there for weary travelers, or perhaps for guests who wanted to have some tea after their morning walk. Such thoughtful treats had been placed throughout the facility.

What guests wanted differed greatly depending on whether they were there for the view of the ocean, peace and quiet, or something to fill their stomach. The inn's management had provided these places of respite in such a way that guests would naturally gravitate toward them.

These little clever elements of design had been tempered through years of welcoming guests since the old days. As the girls stood there in shock, I called out to them.

"You should enjoy this place to your heart's content. It's best that you don't

shy away from things that interest you.”

They looked at me with expectant eyes and nodded. I wasn't really worried about Wridra, but Marie had a tendency to be a bit too reserved as an elf who had lived in the city. But since we had come all the way here, I wanted her to have as much fun as possible.

I noticed she had gently taken my hand, so I crouched slightly to make eye contact with her. I whispered, “Don't be shy.” Marie blinked, then turned to me.

“You mean like this?” I made a muffled noise as I felt something faintly touch my lips. She had taken me completely by surprise, and her smile deepened when she saw the look on my face. She put a finger up to her lips as telling me to keep quiet.

“How much time do you think we've spent together? Now, don't worry about me. Let's go to the reception desk, shall we? The staff member there is giving us a troubled look.” I wanted to point out that it was probably her fault the receptionist looked troubled, and I could see Wridra staring at me with a teasing grin. Hiding my red face with my hands wasn't enough for me to recover from the shock, so I cleared my throat.

We passed through the old-fashioned entrance, and the receptionist bowed to us. She must have known we were guests here from the travel bags we had brought with us.

“Welcome, Mr. Kitase. We thank the three of you for staying with us today.”

“Thank you. These two can speak Japanese without issues, so please don't hesitate to interact with them.” The woman in the muted uniform glanced at the two girls looking around their surroundings, then smiled.

“Yes, of course. Please let us know if you would like to speak to any English-speaking staff. Now, I would like to show you all to the Shiosai Room. This way, if you please.”

The girls must have been surprised to be guided to our rooms by a staff member like this. Marie in particular was bewildered by being treated like royalty, and she seemed to be wondering if they were mistaking us for

someone else.

The staff member smiled as we went up the stairs. She looked very young. I wondered if she was a student working here part-time.

“You must be tired from your trip. I apologize for the long set of stairs.”

“Oh, this is nothing. This place must have a long history.”

The woman with the bob cut laughed pleasantly, then said, “Oh, it’s simply old.” I saw a hint of pride in her eyes and wondered if she was a relative of the owners.

We stepped out into a bright area, and she gestured behind her. We turned around as directed and were surprised to find large glass windows overlooking the ocean.

“Ah, what a luxury. To think we can enjoy such a view from the staircase.”

“Yes, we are quite proud of this view. It was designed as such so our guests could enjoy their long climb up the stairs.”

Wridra seemed to be deeply impressed. Come to think of it, glass was rare in and of itself in the other world, and it was the perfect material to enjoy scenery like this. The building on the second floor was still under construction, and she had mentioned using Izu inns for reference, so we may have hit the jackpot here. As I considered this, the staff woman spoke to us once again.

“You are quite lucky. The fireworks contest was delayed due to the typhoon, so it will be held tonight instead. Perhaps you would like to go take a look?”

“Oh, really? I thought Obon was already over here...”

“Yes, it ended some time ago. We were disappointed about the fireworks being pushed back because of the typhoon. That’s why I was planning on going to see it tonight with a friend of mine.” She stuck her tongue out to the side with a youthful expression, then opened the door to a room.

Sunlight poured in, and the ocean could be seen beyond the window. The seemingly old-fashioned building had an excellent view, and I remembered hearing somewhere that historic buildings had a monopoly on locations with good views.

There was an open-air bath in the garden with hot water gushing out of it, and we could hear the sound of the sea from here. The antiquity of the place no longer bothered us at all; in fact, it looked like an entirely different world to us.

The staff woman seemed rather pleased by our reaction.

“Welcome to the Shiosai Room, also known as the Sea Roar room. We hope you enjoy your stay,” she said cheerfully, with a bright smile.

-- Chapter of Midsummer to be continued in the next volume --

Afterword

Hello, this is Makishima.

I am thrilled that I'm able to write the afterword for volume 7 of the series. It's thanks to all of the readers that we were able to come this far. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

We entered the summer season in the previous volume, and it's become summer in earnest now in volume 7. Will the leisure facilities of Japan pique Mariabelle the elf's interest? I'm sure the readers would like to see her experience many different cultures.

There are many events that come to mind upon hearing the word "summer," but there are several difficulties when it comes to Koto Ward in Tokyo, where the story takes place. Some of them being the Kitase household's income, and the fact that every place is crowded due to the dense population. Even with all of the excitement for events in Japan, it's hard to enjoy them properly when they're absolutely packed with people. That's why Kitase racked his brain to find a place where Marie could have fun. Despite his sleepy-looking face, he's quite the hard worker. He also certainly faces difficulties at work that he doesn't openly talk about, which explains why he likes to spread his wings while in the dream world. He can spread them a bit too wide sometimes, but hopefully, you can let that slide.

Now, I'd like to thank Yappen for drawing the summer illustrations that are so adorable and full of energy. My wife and I kept repeating how cute they were countless times. They really are amazingly cute.

Thank you, Aonoesu, for the pages upon pages of the lovely manga. I always read them with a huge smile on my face. Wridra has finally become a regular member of the cast! She may seem like a troublemaker, but she's quite a thoughtful woman. Seeing the positive comments about her from readers also makes me smile from ear to ear.

This volume should be released in July, which should be right in the midst of

full-blown summer. Let's enjoy the summer while cooling off and hydrating in moderation and listening to the sounds of wind chimes.

I look forward to greeting you again in the next afterword.



"H-HOW
IS IT? DOES
IT LOOK
STRANGE?"

Just then, I
could see the
sight of the
beach behind
her. It was just
my imagination,
but I could
smell the salt in
the air and sun
shining brightly
overhead.

"IT LOOKS
LOVELY ON YOU.
IT REALLY BRINGS
OUT YOUR CHARM,
LIKE YOU'RE A
FAIRY COME TO
LIFE."

Welcome to
7 Japan,
Ms. Elf!



It even knocked the sleepy expression right off my face. With the combined weight of two people, we swayed wildly within the tube with each curve, Marie screaming in fear the entire time. We cleared the final curve and slid down the straight end section, and Marie's screams grew more frantic as we picked up speed.

And so, Shirley slowly stepped forward. Shirley was an ancient being that knew demons very well.

As she removed her embroidered blindfold, the soldiers that had been prepared to accept their death looked up at her, their eyes slightly widened. Shirley had changed her appearance a bit. The outline of her body was slightly blurred, and her sky blue eyes framed by long eyelashes were now fully bared.

Doula moved out of her way without thinking, and Shirley touched the fallen soldier's wound with the tip of her pale finger.

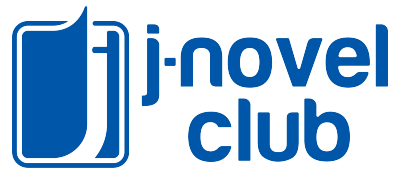












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Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf! Volume 7

by Makishima Suzuki

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